A COMPARISON OF THE DOCTRINES OF MINISTRY OF FRANCIS ASBURY AND PHILIP WILLIAM OTTERBEIN

by Jeffrey P. Mickle

When one inquires these days as to the roots of "United" Methodism, it is not unusual for the answer to ignore the heritage of the Evangelical United Brethren, from whence the "United" arises. If any mention is made of this branch of the church, it is often described as "the same thing as Methodism, except it developed among the Germans." The point of distinction between the Methodists, on the one hand, and the Evangelicals and United Brethren, on the other hand, almost inevitably, in popular explanations, is attributed to the difference in national origins: "They believed the same thing, but could not get together because they spoke different languages; but, when everyone came to speak English, there was no reason to remain separate; therefore, we now have merged our two heritages into one church." These popular sentiments are not merely the ill-founded opinions of misinformed pastors and Sunday school teachers. Similar conclusions have been expressed and supported among ecclesiastical and academic scholars:

These two churches, similar in doctrinal outlook as well as in matters of organization, may well have come together years ago if it had not been for a language difference — the Evangelical United Brethren doing their work among the German-speaking people, while the Methodists worked among the English-speaking population. With these language barriers now gone, all real reasons for continuing separation ceased to exist.

The problem is that such explanations are simplistic and misleading. They give several wrong impressions, including the notion that the Germans were merely copying what the English had already introduced, and the mistaken idea that there were basically no differences in beliefs or polity between the Germans and the English. To the contrary, however, there were significant differences between the two groups at the time of

---

1These observations are made on the basis of the author's personal experience in dealing with local churches, both of E.U.B. background and of Methodist background.

union in 1968 — both theological and governmental — which were set aside in the belief that "the ideal of unity and the advantages of union were worth fighting for."

This paper will address one aspect of the differences between the former Evangelical United Brethren Church and the former Methodist Church: the doctrine of ministry. It is necessary, then, to turn to two of the pioneers of these churches, Francis Asbury and Philip William Otterbein, who shaped the distinctive understandings of ministry in the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. Beginning with an historical approach to the interactions between these two men and the respective constituencies, and proceeding to a more systematic exposition of each man's doctrine of ministry, we will compare and contrast the two views and draw some brief conclusions about the impact which they made on the future directions of their communions, particularly as they surfaced at the time of unification in the 1960's.

Many of the denominational historians of the nineteenth century reflect a tendency to emphasize the distinctiveness of one denomination as over against another. Recently, the tendency has shifted to a defense of the ecumenicity of the early denominational leaders. In fact, both approaches can be supported from the historical evidence concerning Otterbein and Asbury.

Otterbein arrived in America as an ordained minister of the German Reformed Church in 1752, at the age of 26. He was educated at Herborn University and instilled with an evangelical pietism which changed his understanding of the pastor's role from "being exclusively 'men of the word of God' to also being a 'personally accountable representative witness, and an example of the spiritual life of godliness.'" He served Reformed churches in Lancaster (1752-1758), Tulpehocken (1758-1760), Frederick (1760-1765), and York (1763-1770, 1771-1774), supplying pulpits in nearby congregations as much as he could while retaining full

---


4"Ministry" is here used in the narrow sense of the professional, full-time office of leadership in the broader ministry of all Christians.

5Due to limitations of space, we shall ignore the contribution of Jacob Albright and the Evangelical Association.

pastoral responsibility for the larger congregations. In 1774, he moved to Baltimore, where he became the pastor of the German Evangelical Reformed Church, whose name indicates the reputation that Otterbein had acquired. Here he remained until his death in 1813.

Francis Asbury arrived in America in 1771, also at age 26, as one of John Wesley's helpers. In his journal, he claimed his motivation for being in America: “to live to God, and bring others so to do.” He, too, was part of the eighteenth century awakening in the evangelical, pietistic spirit. He moved from his point of arrival in Philadelphia to New York and soon became dissatisfied with the laid-back attitude of his superiors in regard to the itinerancy — an indication of his early commitment to this style of ministry. He also made early objections to the lax discipline which he perceived among the Methodist societies and put forward a plan to rectify the situation.

It should not surprise us to learn, therefore, that the earliest verifiable dealings which Asbury had regarding Otterbein — even before they had met — concerned the matter of organization. Along with Benedict Schwope, a German Reformed minister in Baltimore, Asbury decided “to promote his [Otterbein’s] settling here [in Baltimore] and laid a plan nearly similar to ours [the Methodist’s].”

Asbury’s Journal entry from May 3, 1774, records a meeting he held with Otterbein and Schwope shortly after Otterbein’s arrival in Baltimore. It indicates that Asbury talked with them about “the plan of Church discipline on which they intended to proceed.” Asbury came away thinking that “they agreed to imitate our methods as nearly as possible.” This expectation undoubtedly refers to the establishment of small groups or classes as a means of spiritual discipline among the women and men of the church. In fact, Otterbein had already used such gatherings in several of his previous ministries. In Baltimore, he likewise

---

1Core, op. cit., p. 17, 43-49.
4Asbury, Journal, I, p. 105. The entry is from February 3, 1774, before Otterbein had moved to Baltimore and, presumably, before he had met Asbury. It should be noted that Lawrence claims an acquaintance between Asbury and Otterbein as early as 1771, op. cit., p. 218.
organized a cluster of prayer groups and classes among the congregations of the Reformed in the area.\textsuperscript{13} Whether the 48-year-old Otterbein took the advice of the 29-year-old Asbury, or was planning to establish the classes before the meeting with Asbury, we cannot know, although the former seems unlikely.\textsuperscript{14} Nevertheless, the Baltimore connection — as the center of early Methodism and the home of Otterbein — was to yield a lasting friendship between the two men as they gradually wielded more and more influence in their respective ecclesiastical circles and in the culture at large.

Over the next decade (1774-1784), Asbury and Otterbein met several times. According to Asbury's \textit{Journal}, they met again on March 28, 1775, when Asbury reflected, "They both [Otterbein and Schwope] appear to be sincerely religious, and intend to make proposals to the German synod this year, to lay a plan for the reformation of the Dutch congregations."\textsuperscript{15} Unfortunately, there is no evidence that the proposal was ever presented to the German synod. Several other meetings are recorded by Asbury during this period, signaling the continued association of the two men. One tradition even tells of Otterbein protecting Asbury when the latter was arrested in Baltimore during the American Revolution.\textsuperscript{16} The climax of this first stage in the Otterbein-Asbury relationship came at the Christmas Conference of 1784, when Otterbein assisted in the ordination of Asbury as bishop, at Asbury's request.\textsuperscript{17} In this early stage of interaction, Otterbein and Asbury became friends, as symbolized in the Christmas Conference ordination. They agreed on the evangelical awakening as the foundation for the church's mission. Yet, there were some signs of disagreement on matters of organization and discipline even at this date, which were to be intensified as institutionalization occurred.

The Christmas Conference marks a most significant turning point among the Methodists, from "society" to "church." The next decade (1784-1794) was marked by efforts to clarify that identity change and to secure a structure for the church polity. In 1786, there was a symbolic break from Wesley's power over the American church. In 1789, presiding

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13}Core, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 32-33; cf., Drury, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 144. The "Minutes of the Association of Reformed Congregations of Maryland, including Canawacke, Pennsylvania," (known as the Pipe Creek United Brotherhood) from May 1774 to June 1776 are printed in Core, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 115-119, detailing the organization of these "classes."
\item \textsuperscript{14}John Dallas Robertson, "Christian Newcomer (1749-1830), Pioneer of Church Discipline and Union Among the United Brethren in Christ, the Evangelical Association, and the Methodist Episcopal Church," Ph.D. dissertation, George Washington University 1973, p. 92.
\item \textsuperscript{15}Asbury, \textit{Journal}, I, p. 153.
\item \textsuperscript{16}Drury, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 147.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Core, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 65. Asbury was ordained as deacon and elder at the same conference. It should be noted that Wesley intended Asbury to be "superintendent," not "bishop." Asbury took the title of bishop on his own, in spite of Wesley's objections.
\end{itemize}
elders came on the scene, officially. The first general conference was held in 1792, at which time the first major schism in American Methodism was triggered by James O'Kelly over the authority of the episcopacy. Let these examples suffice to the informed reader as evidence for the emerging shape of the Methodist Episcopal Church: methodical, organized, disciplined. ¹⁸

With whatever word one may choose to describe the growing Methodist Episcopal Church, several emphases come to the fore as points of distinction for a doctrine of ministry. The bishop, who was elected by the conference and assisted by presiding elders, exercised power which was established as finally authoritative over the itinerancy. The function of this itinerancy was to preach the gospel to both the faithful and the faithless, and to administer general oversight over the discipline of church members through a highly organized system, centralized in the conference and the episcopacy. Primary ministerial identity was derived from membership in the annual conference. Local preachers, who did not travel on a circuit, were not members of the conference (even if ordained); nor were they entitled to an appointment by the bishop. The two norms were itinerancy and conference membership. The motivation for these norms was the desire for a disciplined and adaptable ministry — modeled, according to Asbury, on the apostolic example. The understanding of ordination was taken largely from the Anglican church, with three levels of ordination: deacon, elder, and bishop. The first two orders functioned hierarchically with the deacons seen as a step below elders, but above traveling lay preachers. The episcopacy was understood as a general superintendency, shaped by Asbury into an itinerant office as well. Authority to administer the sacraments, which first became ecclesiastically proper with the ordination of elders, was not the primary means of distinction in Methodist ministry. Indeed, unordained preachers could be members of annual conferences and, thereby, part of the itinerancy. At the same time, ordained clergy who were located did not exercise vote in the conference, although they could administer the sacraments. ¹⁹ If we were to characterize this emerging scheme, we would have to say that the potesta iurisdictionis (the power of jurisdiction, centered in the various conferences) took priority over the potesta ordinis (the power of ordination, traditionally understood as Word and Sacrament.) ²⁰ In fact, the two powers were somewhat disjoined insofar as some ministers only exercised their prerogatives under one of the two,

¹⁸Norwood, op. cit., pp. 119-127.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 133-144. An expanded treatment of this topic by Norwood can be found in "The Shaping of Methodist Ministry," Religion in Life, 43 (Autumn 1974), pp. 337-351.

²⁰This insight came from a lecture by Dr. David C. Steinmetz, September 20, 1979, in the course, "Ordination in the Protestant Tradition."
instead of under the authority of both.

In the midst of this formative period, there was a meeting which is significant for this investigation. On June 4, 1786, Asbury met Otterbein and expressed his concern about organizing the evangelical revival among the Germans. Asbury writes in his Journal: "I called on Mr. Otterbein: we had some free conversation on the necessity of forming a church among the Dutch, holding conferences, the order of its government, etc."21 Obviously, there already was a church among the Germans. Clearly, Asbury was not talking about just any church. He wanted to start a Methodist church among the Germans, and evidently tried to recruit the help of an old friend and, furthermore, an eminent German minister. Although there is no literary evidence for an explicit response from Otterbein, one can deduce his reaction from what happened after the meeting.

Three years after Asbury presented his proposals to him, Otterbein called the first regular meeting of the leaders of the German evangelical revival. There were seven ministers present at this meeting, held in Baltimore. Seven others were unable to attend the meeting, yet still were recognized as members of the group. Among these preachers were persons from the Reformed, Mennonite, Amish, and Moravian traditions. In 1791, another meeting was called in York, Pennsylvania, with a slight increase in membership.22 No minutes were kept at either of these meetings, but there is no sign of following Asbury's design for forming a German Methodist Church. Basically, the group was not ecclesiastical; rather, it was a loosely organized group of preachers sharing a common interest in the growing revivalistic work.23

Over the next decade, several emerging forms developed that lend some insight into the doctrine of ministry among the men who were, in 1800, to become the United Brethren in Christ. A volunteer itinerancy took shape. Quarterly meetings were held locally among the followers of these German evangelicals, for preaching and administration of the Lord's Supper. Great meetings or big meetings became an important part of the movement. At these gatherings, people would come from relatively long distances, and all of the preachers would gather for a general revival. At such time, the preachers would usually stay around for a brief conference after the preaching services ended. Thus, business sessions of all of the preachers — itinerant and residential — were conducted in con-

23Robertson, op. cit., pp. 96, 105. These conclusions are deduced from several primary sources including the Journal of Christian Newcomer, the Reminiscences of Henry Boehm, and the Minutes of the United Brethren in Christ after 1800.
A Comparison of the Doctrines of Ministry

nection with revival meetings.\textsuperscript{24} To this point, however, the organization of German revivalistic ministers was for the purpose of cooperating in the spreading evangelistic fervor, rather than for organizing a church. They respected one another’s denominational affiliations and recognized each other’s ordinations so that they could “preach untrammeled by sect.” Ability to preach and zeal for the evangelical revival were evidently the primary qualifications for admission to this group’s ministry. Authority to administer the sacraments was reserved for those who had been ordained or specially approved for such functions by the other preachers.\textsuperscript{25} There is a clear disdain for excessive discipline beyond biblical guidelines. The personal guidance of Otterbein and, perhaps, some of the Baltimore Church Rules which he wrote for his congregation in 1785, were understood to be sufficient for order among these “united brethren.” Certainly nothing of the Methodist style of discipline was adopted, or even desired.\textsuperscript{26}

A milestone in the history of the United Brethren in Christ came on September 25, 1800, when a group of fourteen German ministers gathered at the home of Peter Kemp, near Frederick, Maryland, and decided that “yearly a day shall be appointed when the unsectarian preachers shall assemble and counsel how they may conduct their office more and more according to the will of God.”\textsuperscript{27} In effect, the meeting was the first annual conference. Here, the name, “United Brethren in Christ,” was adopted, and two of the preachers were formally elected as superintendents, or bishops: Philip William Otterbein and Martin Boehm.\textsuperscript{28}

Before that time, Otterbein had performed the superintending function on the basis of his natural leadership ability, without any formal election:

All eyes had been directed to him to lead in counsel; the preachers, not one excepted, paid this deference to him; the care of all the Churches had been resting upon him, and such was the love of obedience to him, that if he said to one go, he went; if to

\textsuperscript{24}Robertson, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 101-103. These conclusions are drawn from the \textit{Journal of Christian Newcomer}. It should be noted that when regulations were drawn up, the big meeting (not the annual conference) was the site of examinations and licensing of lay preachers; see the Minutes of the United Brethren in Christ from 1808.

\textsuperscript{25}Minutes of United Brethren in Christ, September 25, 1800, printed in Core, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 120, 121, 123, 125, 126. The special approval can only be documented in 1800 and afterwards.

\textsuperscript{26}Spayth, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 147; Robertson, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 97-98. Christian Newcomer was an exception in the early years to the general “anti-ecclesiastical order” attitude. He favored a Methodist-like plan among the United Brethren early on, but was constantly opposed until after 1805. Robertson, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 113-116.

\textsuperscript{27}Minutes, Core, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 121.

\textsuperscript{28}Spayth, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 83. These details are not recorded in the Minutes.
another come, he came.\textsuperscript{29}

It should be noted that there was no ordination or consecration to the position of superintendent; indeed, there was to be no division of rank, but only of duty. Elder, presbyter, and bishop were all references to the same office, set aside by one ordination. Whereas Asbury took the title of "bishop," and was referred to as such in contemporary documents, Otterbein was commonly called "Father," or sometimes "Reverend," or even "Brother" — the latter term being the form of address among all the other preachers. Clearly, Otterbein and his fellow ministers were not operating from the same ecclesiological framework as were Asbury and his ministers.\textsuperscript{30}

The minutes of the next five conferences (1801-1805) bring to light several important features for Otterbein's doctrine of ministry.\textsuperscript{31} In 1801, we find, "The preachers were examined as to whether they are willing according to their ability to labor in the work of the Lord." At each conference thereafter, the individual condition of each preacher and his work was among the first orders of business for the conference. Also in 1801, we read the following: "It was asked who are willing to take charge of a circuit and preach at the appointed places. Then the following preachers offered themselves..." That passage indicates a voluntary itinerancy. In 1803, there was a slight modification of this practice in some locations. In Pennsylvania, for example, two of the leading brethren were named to "place the preachers in order...as may tend most to the honor of God and the benefit of the hearers and the bettering of the church of God." In other places, such as Maryland, the work was "left to

\textsuperscript{29}Ibid. Emphasis is mine. Cf., Asbury's claim for episcopal authority which includes the reason, "Because the signs of an apostle have been seen in me." Journal, II, p. 470. Such a self-description is not identical with the description of Otterbein given by Spyth: "he would not be called Chief," op. cit., p. 133. These two excerpts give some insight into the difference between the two men and their understanding of their office.

\textsuperscript{30}Spyth, op. cit., pp. 96, 105, 132, 153-1549 Minutes, Core, op. cit., pp. 121, 125. Newcomer's Journal, even when Otterbein ordained Newcomer, the reference is to "Father Otterbein," quoted in Robertson, op. cit., p. 172; Asbury, too, called Otterbein "Father," Journal, III, 333. It seems significant that, in the official records of the United Brethren in Christ, Otterbein's title does not distinguish him from any of the other brethren. All are "brothers." Asbury, of course is referred to as "Bishop" from the start. The distinction probably rests on the difference between Anglican and Reformed background, which we shall consider in more detail later.

\textsuperscript{31}We have few extant writings of Otterbein; therefore, we have to extrapolate from a variety of sources to arrive at his understanding of ministry. It seems fair to assume that his unquestioned influence in these first conferences shaped the decisions concerning ministry which are made therein. Thus, we feel justified to use the data from the 1800-1805 Minutes (the Conferences which Otterbein attended) as sources for his doctrine of ministry.
the preachers in Maryland themselves to arrange." Evidently, the norm was to allow preachers as much individual prerogative as possible. If there were some obstacles or special circumstances, however, the conference could appoint special overseers for the good of the general church and its mission. The loosely organized gathering was gradually becoming more structured and centralized in the annual conference. Still, when compared to the authoritarian style of Asbury and his insistence on obedience to the Methodist ecclesiastical hierarchy (especially, the bishop), the United Brethren structure of voluntary cooperation among equals of various ecclesiastical backgrounds seemed loose and ungoverned. Asbury's assessment in 1803 was fair: "There are now upwards of twenty German preachers somehow connected with Mr. Philip Otterbein and Martin Boehm; but they want authority, and the Church wants discipline."

One final item of ecclesiology should be noted about the United Brethren during their early days under Otterbein. Unlike the disjunction between potesta iurisdictionis and potesta ordinis found in Methodism, the United Brethren maintained a unity between the two. All preachers were members of the annual conference, whether traveling or not. Thus, all members of the conference had the authority to preach, and all preachers in conference authorized individuals to preach, and/or baptize, and/or administer the Lord's Supper, and/or solemnize marriages. Sometimes all of the sacramental prerogatives were granted; sometimes, only baptism was authorized; other times, an individual was allowed only to preach. No ordinations were performed until October 2, 1813, when Otterbein ordained three of the long-time preachers as elders, six weeks before he died. Administration of the Sacraments and preaching of the Word were responsibilities delegated by the gathered preachers. They did not coincide with ordination or episcopal appointment. In a sense, then, one could say that the potesta ordinis became a function of the potesta iurisdictionis: the conference authorized the power of Word and Sacrament; that power did not rest on its own authority (i.e., it was not only for ordained clergy). Thus, the two powers were not disjoined.

Before we turn to a systematic exposition of the doctrines of ministry

32Minutes, Core, op. cit., pp. 122, 123. Emphasis is mine. Virginia followed a kind of via media: "Resolved that Daniel Strickler and Christian Krum shall call the preachers in Virginia together and with one another determine how they should preach and rightly arrange their plan."
33Asbury, Journal, II, p. 400. The one reservation about that statement is that Otterbein may not have considered his connection of "unsectarian preachers" as a "Church."
34Spyath, op. cit., pp. 143-144. Some exceptions for disciplinary reasons prove the rule. Minutes, Core, op. cit., pp. 121-27. Authorization to preach could also be issued at big meetings by other preachers. See above, n. 24.
of Asbury and Otterbein, we must briefly consider one final historical matter. From 1809 until 1814, there were serious negotiations between the Methodists and the United Brethren concerning some form of union. Considerable correspondence took place, with the active participation of Asbury and the indirect influence of Otterbein through Christian Newcomer. Agreements were reached to allow mutual recognition of members at the Lord's Supper and in class meetings, as well as free interchange of pulpits among licensed preachers of both denominations. Preaching style and doctrine were almost identical between the two bodies.

Still, there were some significant differences. The Methodists suggested the adoption of their Discipline among the United Brethren. In reply to this proposal, the latter characterized the Methodist system of order as "some external church regulations." Here is the crux of the difference: the Methodists regarded church "discipline" as an essential part of their faith, but the United Brethren saw it as a cumbersome externality. More specifically, this issue can be localized in the issue of class meetings. The Methodist plan required such gatherings, but the United Brethren said, "our preachers are at liberty to keep class meetings . . . at any place they think proper or to be useful." The irreconcilable difference concerning church organization eventually led to the breakdown of negotiations. Paul Blankenship summarizes the differences as they finally emerged with the adoption of a United Brethren Discipline in 1817:

The organization which emerged was distinctly different from that of the Methodists at several points in spite of many similarities. United Brethren bishops were to be elected for a term of four years instead of for life, pastors were given a large measure of discretion and authority in their work, and the churches were given control of their local affairs. This loose connectional system which leaned strongly toward congregationalism stood in sharp contrast to the Methodist practice of electing bishops for life and giving them almost absolute authority while allowing laymen and local churches very little if any voice in Methodist affairs.

In practice, the United Brethren consisted of mostly local preachers — who had equality in vote with itinerants in the annual conference. To the contrary, of course, Asbury relied on unmarried itinerant preachers and looked down on located preachers, who did not have a vote in the annual

---

36 These negotiations have been thoroughly treated in two recent sources: Robertson, op. cit., pp. 117, 155, and Paul F. Blankenship, "History of Negotiations for Union Between Methodists and Non-Methodists in the United States," Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1965, pp. 177-195. My conclusions are drawn from these two sources.

37 Correspondence on May 10, 1809, quoted in Lawrence, op. cit., I, p. 350.

38 Correspondence quoted in Robertson, op. cit., p. 142. Emphasis is mine.

A Comparison of the Doctrines of Ministry

conference.  

Asbury’s funeral sermon for Martin Boehm, preached on April 23, 1812, reflects the same conclusions:

I pause here to indulge in reflections upon the past. Why was the German reformation in the middle States, that sprang up with Boehm, Otterbein, and their helpers, not more perfect? . . . There was no master-spirit to rise up and organize and lead them. Some of the ministers located, and only added to their charge partial traveling labors; and all were independent. It remains to be proved whether a reformation, in any country, or under any circumstances, can be perpetuated without a well-directed itinerancy.

Here, then, lies the difference between the Methodist Episcopal Church of Francis Asbury and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ of Philip William Otterbein. Language was not the barrier; rather, the barrier was a difference in understanding of church discipline and government. John Robertson surmises, “Had not the difference over discipline stood in the way, the United Brethren would probably have been absorbed by the Methodist Church, as the former gradually adopted the English language.”

Let us turn, now, to a more systematic exposition of the doctrines of ministry of Asbury and Otterbein, the two men whose influence in their respective denominations contributed greatly to the differing understandings of church discipline and government. For Asbury, we have an abundance of documentary material with which to work. His Journal and Letters are filled with many allusions to the doctrine of ministry. From these, we shall focus on his most elaborate exposition on the topic, “A Valedictory Address to William McKendree,” written on August 5, 1813. When we turn to Otterbein, however, we find very little material from his own hand, and not much more from his contemporaries on the topic of the doctrine of ministry. Evidently, Otterbein also made at least one major address on the subject in a sermon based on Jude 14-25, delivered before the 1801 annual conference. What remains is the following outline: “I. The Sanctity of the Ministerial Office; II. The Servants of this Office to Be Men of Faith, of Prayer, and of the Holy Ghost; III. The Duties of the Office; IV. Its Great Responsibilities.”

For Newcomer, the address was powerful; he records, “The force with which he pointed out the greatness, the importance, and responsibility of

---

40Drury, op. cit., p. 258.
41Quoted in Francis Hollingsworth, “Notices of the Life and Labours of Martin Boehm and William Otterbein; and Other Ministers of the Gospel among the United German Brethren,” The Methodist Magazine, 6 (July 1823): 253.
42Robertson, op. cit., p. 153.
44Core, op. cit., p. 91.
the ministerial office will never be forgotten by me.” Unfortunately, we cannot extrapolate far with that material. Instead, we shall use bits from several sources to piece together Otterbein’s doctrine of ministry, with primary attention given to “The Constitution and Ordinances of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Baltimore, Maryland, 1785,” which he wrote.

Systematically, there are two questions: first, what is the form of ministry; second, what is the style of ministry? The form of ministry will be analyzed in terms of orders of offices of ministry, and in terms of administration or government of the ministers. The style of ministry will be concerned with the expectations that the church has of the ministers in their official functions.

In his “Valedictory Address to William McKendree,” Francis Asbury tries to establish the Methodist Episcopal doctrine of ministry as the recovery of the apostolic model of the New Testament, which has been lost since the second century. In his outline of the apostolic authority of the “primitive order,” Asbury relies on Thomas Haweis’ History of the Church of Christ and here finds a scholarly defense for his doctrine of ministry as grounded in the New Testament. Of course, he also borrows heavily from Wesley.

The form of ministry, according to Asbury, is a three-fold pattern of bishops, elders, and deacons under the governmental scheme of a modified episcopacy. The three-fold ministry is, for Asbury, imperative to restore the order of the apostolic church. Regardless of the Presbyterian denial or the Anglican abuse, the episcopacy, presbytery and diaconate are all found in the New Testament. Asbury quotes Haweis in defense of this assertion regarding the episcopacy:

All united in one Church fellowship [so the Methodists] under the superintendency of apostolic men at first and on their decease, the most distinguished for zeal, wisdom, sufferings, influence, or respectability of any kind, was called by the suffrage of the elders and people to be their superintendent, president, praeses; hegoumenos, a leader; and thus the name of bishop (kat’ exochen), on account of preeminence, became very early appropriate to one who was primus inter pares; and, as Archbishop Usher says, differed only in degree of advantagement and not in order.

Concerning elders, he cites Haweis as concluding:

I can only observe here that I find in all these widely dispersed and numerous congregations no mention made of any appointment but that of presbyters, all cemented in one bond of union under the supervisal of the great itinerant evangelists.

---

45Drury, op. cit., p. 188, quoting from Newcomer’s Journal.
48Ibid., pp. 483-484.
And, for the diaconate, Asbury, through Haweis, writes:

The care of the poor widows led to the institution of the order of deacons... These were accordingly chosen by general suffrage, not for each separate congregation, but for the whole body, and were set apart by the apostles after solemn prayer and imposition of hands, to this service. Though the care of the widows was immediately intrusted to them, it prevented them not from being employed in other labors of love. ... They were village preachers, ... and were not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. Paul (Acts xxiv, 23), in revisiting the Churches which had been planted principally by himself, edifies, comforts, and establishes them by ordaining elders in every Church with prayers and fasting.49

Thus, the three-fold ministry is grounded in the New Testament, as is the hierarchical understanding of deacons becoming elders, from whose number bishops are chosen.

Bishops "examined the chosen candidates for the ministry, and, with the presbyter, ordained them by imposition of hands." Bishops also "preside in the deliberations of their several Churches, with the presbyters, their assessors." Among the ministers, the bishop is the permanent president:

Though James was not superior to Peter or the other apostles at Jerusalem ... he had been evidently appointed to fill the place of president, or primus inter pares. Yet neither he nor any of his apostolic associates assumed to themselves authority to decide but by the suffrage of the whole body of the Church under immediate divine direction.50

Thus Asbury concludes that the conference system has its roots at the Council of Jerusalem. But, the notion of first among equals meant, in practice, a distinctly higher status for bishops in the exercise of disciplinary authority. Asbury honestly states, "There is not — nor indeed, in my mind, can there be — a perfect equality between a constant president, and those over whom he always presides."51 The bishop, then, is ordained to the permanent status of president of the conference, perpetual overseer of the Church and its ministers, and the one who exercises highest disciplinary authority. Still, the bishop was not the sole authority. The government of the church was in the hands of the traveling ministry. Unlike the Anglican episcopal system, the bishop did not ordain the elders on his own authority. He did so on the authority of the conference. Thus, the form of ministerial government can be described as a modified episcopacy, with authority delegated to the bishop by the conference (or, presbyterate).52

49Ibid., p. 483.
50Ibid., pp. 480, 484, quoting Haweis.
51Ibid., II, p. 290.
52Robert Emory, History of the Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1843), pp. 134-135, 345. It is reasonable to assume that Asbury’s doctrine of ministry was congruent with the early Discipline.
Asbury says less in his Journal about elders and deacons than he says about bishops. For this data, we must turn primarily to the early Methodist Episcopal Disciplines. Here we discover that elders and deacons are on the same level as bishops concerning the preaching of the Word — as are lay preachers. Elders share equally with bishops in the ministry of the Sacraments (both Lord’s Supper and Baptism). Deacons share partially in this ministry (Baptism in the absence of an elder and assistance of the elder in the Lord’s Supper). Ordination is done by the bishop as a function delegated by the elders. Bishops alone ordain deacons; bishops are assisted by elders in the ordination of elders; and bishops ordain bishops unless there are no bishops, in which case three elders ordain the person elected to the episcopacy.\(^53\) Indeed, the ordination prerogative of elders is an important key to the justification of any Methodist ordinations in the first place.\(^54\) Thus, bishops are different from elders solely in that they are ordained to a higher administrative authority. The governing authority of elders and deacons depended on their conference membership. If they were not itinerants, then they could not share in the governing of the church. If a lay person wanted to share in the church’s governing, that person would have to become a traveling preacher.\(^55\)

For Otterbein, whose inheritance comes from the Reformed tradition, the form of ministry is that of a single order of ordained clergy (elders) shared with the laity under the government of a modified presbyterian system. In the Rules which Otterbein drew up for the Evangelical Reformed Church of Baltimore in 1785, he outlines a threefold pattern of ministry, two of which are lay offices. There is the “preacher,” elected by the male members of the congregation to perform pastoral duties, to administer the Sacraments, and to preach and teach the Word. The three lay elders are selected by the preacher for the lifelong office (or, until they can no longer serve due to immorality or debility) to exercise discipline among church members and to govern the affairs of the church. Three lay deacons are elected annually by the congregation to share, for one year, the duties of the elders and any others which the preacher may assign to them.\(^56\) It is hard to know if these rules were practiced precisely among the early United Brethren in Christ. According to Spayth, the earliest United Brethren historian, the rules which the church operated under until 1815 were the unwritten rules of Otterbein. Spayth prints these rules and rightly points out that they lack

\(^{53}\)Ibid., pp. 124, 134, 135, 183, 184, 345.


\(^{55}\)Ibid., p. 16; Emory, op. cit., p. 115.

\(^{56}\)Core, op. cit., pp. 112-114.
any specific forms or governing rules for preachers. Yet, says Spayth, "these rules Mr. Otterbein preferred to the general rules of the Methodists."57

Furthermore, it should be noted that the 1785 Baltimore rules provide for a connection of preachers among the churches in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia that "stand in fraternal unity with us."58 Thus, there is a presbyterate of clergy among the brethren of Otterbein. But the primary governing power lies, according to Otterbein, in the local church. The assembly of ministers is for general review of the various churches' states of affairs, and, perhaps, to discern where leadership needs are to be filled.59 When Otterbein and Boehm are elected to be superintendents, or bishops, of the United Brethren, there is no ordination to that office. It is understood that such superintendents are not different from ordained preachers in order, but only in the functions of oversight and presiding at conferences. Indeed, the superintendents are elected for four-year terms, rather than life.60 They do not appoint preachers; preachers usually volunteer for certain assignments or are appointed by the conference of preachers. Still, there is a superintendent among the clergy; thus, the government that Otterbein supports is that of a modified presbyterian system.

As an ordained elder, Otterbein ordains other elders in the Reformed Church.61 Indeed, the function of ordaining seems to be the only prerogative uniquely reserved for the ordained clergy in the early United Brethren in Christ. Authority to exercise the ministries of Word and Sacrament is delegated by the conference according to the circumstances of the churches and the qualifications of the preacher. It is not tied to the laying on of hands, although Otterbein almost certainly would have regarded the ministry of Word and Sacrament as reserved for ordained clergy in his earlier doctrine of ministry in the Reformed Church. It is significant to note that Christian Newcomer is elected bishop before he is ordained by Otterbein.62 Indeed, the reason that Otterbein is asked to ordain other people is so that they "may perform the like office for others."63

59See the “Minutes of the Association of Reformed Congregations,” Core, op. cit., pp. 115-119.
60Spayth, op. cit., p. 105.
61In what follows, the term “elder” refers to the single order of ordained ministry, not to the lay office mentioned above. Spayth, op. cit., p. 56. Remember also that Otterbein takes part in Asbury’s ordination.
62The office is “not thought to carry any sacerdotal or spiritual authority above that of an ordinary preacher,” Robertson, op. cit., p. 173.
63Lawrence, op. cit., II, p. 57, quoted from Minutes of Miami Conference Journal of 1813.
The actual ordination is performed by Otterbein, with the assistance of William Ryland, an elder of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Two elders ordain other people to be elders. Furthermore, the officers of Otterbein’s Baltimore congregation gather in Otterbein’s home for the occasion, and the ordination certificate is issued in the name of the church vestry, not the United Brethren conference. This is an important sign of Otterbein’s doctrine of ministry. When something as important as ordination occurs, he goes to special effort to be sure it is done in the context of the local church. Clearly the ordination is not for the episcopal function (Newcomer was already bishop) or for the administration of Word and Sacrament. Rather, it is for the continuation of the line of ordained clergy among the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. Elders are ordained in order to ordain. The concern is for ecclesiastical succession. The remaining functions of Word, Sacrament and Order reside in, and are distributed by, the conference which approves its own members.

The difference between Asbury and Otterbein regarding the form of ministry is their basic point of orientation. Both men employ the conference of preachers as the main governing body of the connection. But, Asbury’s basic orientation is from the episcopacy down; Otterbein’s basic orientation is from the local congregation up. Thus, for Asbury bishops function as itinerant evangelists and chief administrators of a distinct order. For Otterbein bishops are pastors of a local congregation who take on added duties as overseers of other ministers for the sake of making sure that each local congregation is being served adequately. For Asbury, there is a two-fold order of ordained ministry, sent by the conference to the local congregation, in addition to lay preachers. For Otterbein, there is one order of ministry which arises from the congregation and is regulated by the conference; the minister-in-charge is related first to the needs of the congregation, not to the conference. Thus, the seeming similarity of the conference structure cannot be used as an argument for the congruency of these two early founders of United Methodism. For Asbury, the conference modified a fundamental episcopalian orientation; for Otterbein, the conference modified a presbyterian foundation. It is quite natural, therefore, that Asbury’s concern with centralized discipline would be unappealing to Otterbein, and that Otterbein’s loosely-organized structure would be a source of criticism by Asbury.

The same division exists in the style of ministry. For Asbury, again

---

64Robertson, op. cit., pp. 172-173, relying on Newcomer’s Journal.
65We can assume that the ministry of Word and Sacrament is given at the time of ordination, if it has not been previously received.
66It is noteworthy that Otterbein’s will, written in 1805, begins with the words, “In the name of God Amen: I, William Otterbein, Pastor of the Evangelical Reformed Church, do make. . .” It does not mention the United Brethren, let alone the episcopacy. Core, op. cit., p. 74.
A Comparison of the Doctrines of Ministry

attempting to recover apostolic purity, the style of ministry is necessarily itinerant for bishops, and preferably so for the other ministers. Celibacy, in turn, is a desirable feature for an effective itinerancy. The norm for Asbury is the traveling, single, young man who goes from place to place on his circuit, preaching, visiting the sick, meeting with the societies after the preaching service, keeping close records of membership, exercising supervision and discipline over local leaders, teaching young people, giving a personal example of piety and holiness, and, if ordained, administering the Sacrament, marrying, burying, and conducting the divine liturgy—all according to the detailed specifications in the Discipline, even to the detail of naming the hour for morning preaching. Monetary income is sparse; educational attainment, while being encouraged, is not nearly as important as personal enthusiasm, loyalty, and fruits appropriate to the task given. Superintendents, whether presiding elders or bishops, have basically the same functions, only on a broader scale. More than one historian has noted that Asbury himself was the model par excellence of this style of ministry.

Otterbein, on the other hand, was a residential pastor, who traveled to other churches occasionally, and at times even had a regular circuit; he, therefore, understood something of the itinerancy, but preferred the residential pastorate for himself. The Baltimore Rules of 1785 presuppose the residential style of ministry. The preacher is to visit all worshippers,

in health and in sickness, and on all occasions. He shall admonish them, baptize their children, attend to their funerals, impart instruction to their youth; and, should they have any children, the Church shall interest herself for their religious education. Likewise, the preacher is to attend, along with the lay officials, to “all the affairs of the church.” He is to lead the weekly class meetings, one for men and one for women, if he is available. He is a pastor who lives among the people through the week. For Otterbein, in the United Brethren, itinerancy becomes an optional form of ministry; but it is certainly not expected. More than half of the early United Brethren are family persons, associated with a particular parish. The ministerial style, then, is largely left to the circumstantial needs which a given minister perceives among the people. There are no rules handed down from above, except a few biblical guidelines. Otterbein’s prescriptions for church discipline are fundamentally rooted in Matthew 18:15-17. Of course,

69 Core, op. cit., p. 111.
70 Ibid., pp. 113, 110. The preacher was to be chosen by “the male members of the church.” Undoubtedly, female preachers were not acceptable, p. 112.
Otterbein, like Asbury, expected ministers to be holy persons, exercising exemplary personal discipline and piety. But, unlike Asbury, Otterbein allows the minister freedom to serve as the servant of a particular congregation or circuit, with a relatively small number of restraints or prescribed duties, when compared to the Methodists. As noted earlier, the earliest system of itinerancy is voluntary, and, later, is selectively administered according to regional needs. Roll-taking and membership records are regarded with disdain, particularly with the increasing Mennonite influence. Foot-washing is permitted on the basis of local practice. Briefly, the possibility for a minister to have a more direct or sustained relationship with a local church is viable without loss of standing.

Once again, the basic difference between Asbury and Otterbein regarding style of ministry lies in their basic orientation. For both men, the conference is the primary governing body for ministers. But, for Asbury, the ministry is most effective when the preacher follows the lead of the bishop as a celibate itinerant, bound by rules set forth by the conference. In effect, the traveling preacher is responsible to see that the local church follows the conference rules. For Otterbein, the primary focus shifts from a centralized operation to one based on circumstantial needs, with few specific guidelines being set by the conference, and no discouragement from settling at a particular church. Preacher-pastors are just as acceptable as preacher-itinerants, depending on local needs. Thus, Asbury's Wesleyan background clashes with Otterbein's Reformed background. These two distinctive traditions largely account for the differences between the doctrines of ministry of Asbury and Otterbein, as well as the differences in polity between the Methodists and the United Brethren.

In the following generations, certain changes occurred to bring the two churches closer together. The United Brethren adopted a Discipline and the itinerancy; the Methodists became more pastoral in style, and gave the local congregation more voice in church government. Still, at the time of merger between the Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968, several differences in the understandings of ministry existed. Four, in particular, are clearly related to the early roots we have just discussed. First, in the Evangelical United Brethren Church, the minister was a member of the annual conference, but not a member of the charge conference. Perhaps, in practice, this difference made little difference in the function of pastoral ministry, but the difference points to a clear divergence of views concerning the clergy.

---

72Minutes, Core, op. cit., p. 125; Spayth, op. cit., p. 165. This late verification (1825) was probably grounded in an earlier practice, respecting the customs of the Mennonites.

73Tuell, op. cit., pp. 92-93.
A Comparison of the Doctrines of Ministry

person's relationship to a local congregation. Although the itinerancy was, by now, an essential part of the Evangelical United Brethren, Otterbein's residential character was still reflected in this practice of charge conference membership. Second, the Methodists maintained a two-fold order of ordained ministry (elders and deacons) with bishops as consecrated elders. Among the Evangelical United Brethren, there was a one-fold order (elders) with bishops elected from them. This is a clear reflection of the difference between Otterbein and Asbury concerning the forms of ministry. Thirdly, Methodist bishops were elected to life terms while Evangelical United Brethren bishops were elected to four-year terms, being eligible for re-election. This, too, is a direct reflection of the difference as it existed between Asbury and Otterbein. Finally, Methodist bishops appointed their district superintendents, but Otterbein's descendants elected their superintendents at annual conference. This also reflects a basic difference in understanding of the office of superintendency: is it an office amenable to the conference or the bishop? The Methodist position reflects Asbury's relatively high episcopal notions, while the Evangelical United Brethren position is in keeping with Otterbein's preference for presbyterial rather than episcopal power.74

In conclusion, therefore, we make the following observations: First, although Francis Asbury and Philip William Otterbein were contemporaries who shared a great many beliefs, commitments and goals in common, they were not part of the same immediate background. Rather, they emerged from two distinct traditions which led to significant differences between them. Second, cultural differences were not as significant as ecclesiastical differences in explaining the failure to cooperate more closely during the early years of the Church of the United Brethren and the Methodist Episcopal Church. Third, the issue of church government and, particularly, of the doctrine of ministry kept the Otterbein group separated from the Asbury group. Otterbein's modified presbyterianism and Asbury's modified episcopalianism could not be reconciled on either side at that point in history. Finally, several of the significant issues that separated the modern descendants of these two men can be traced directly back to the differences between their doctrines of ministry.

74These last three differences are cited in Norwood, op. cit., p. 427.