A RECONSIDERATION OF THE FREQUENCY OF THE EUCHARIST IN EARLY AMERICAN METHODISM

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Introduction

Ostensibly the Methodist Episcopal Church came into existence in order to make water, bread and wine accessible to its members. Its birth at the Christmas Conference in 1784 was integrally connected to Wesley's bestowal of ordination on the American preachers. Having its own preachers ordained, and thus able to administer the sacraments, fulfilled the desire of American Methodists for sacramental administration. No longer were they dependent upon the Church of England priests. The acquisition of legitimate sacramental authority thus removed a central reason to remain within Anglicanism and paved the way for the separate creation of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The desire for sacraments from the hands of their own preachers was long-standing among American Methodists. It was evident among both the society members and their preachers. As early as 1772, at least one society had convinced an itinerant to administer the Lord's Supper at its quarterly meeting. Desire for the sacraments did not diminish as Methodism grew. At the 1779 Conference in Fluvanna County, Virginia, the southern itinerants (they were the ones mainly in attendance) formed a presbytery in order to ordain some of their number to administer the sacraments. This they did for a year until Francis Asbury, the General Assistant, prevailed upon them at the 1780 Conference to suspend their administration until John Wesley could provide a more permanent solution.

Wesley took several years to act but once he did, he did so decisively. In the fall of 1784 Wesley appointed Thomas Coke to be Superintendent for American Methodists with power to ordain Asbury also as a

1Francis Asbury, The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury, ed. J. Manning Potts (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), 1:60. This society was located in Maryland. The itinerant who administered, in contradiction of Methodist rules, was Richard Boardman. The society was probably one influenced by preacher Robert Strawbridge, who was a perpetual proponent of itinerant administration of the sacraments. Although the Minutes for the 1773 Conference prohibit any preacher from administering the sacraments, Francis Asbury noted in his journal that Strawbridge was given permission "under the particular direction of the assistant." See Asbury, Journal, 1:85.

Superintendent. Wesley’s design was that Coke and Asbury jointly would ordain the elders and deacons necessary to provide American Methodists with the sacraments. (Wesley also ordained two elders, Richard Whatcoat and Thomas Vasey, at the time he ordained Coke. Whatcoat and Vasey were sent with Coke to America.)

Again, the compelling reason behind Wesley’s action was the need to provide American Methodists with the sacraments. In his letter sent with Coke to America, Wesley outlined his assessment of the American Methodist’s need:

But the case is widely different between England and North-America. Here there are Bishops who have a legal jurisdiction. In America there are none, neither any parish ministers. So that for some hundred miles together there is none either to baptize or to administer the Lord’s Supper. Here therefore my scruples are at an end: and I conceive myself at full liberty, as I violate no order and invade no man’s rights, by appointing and sending labourers into the harvest. ³

Notice it was the utter absence of authorized ministers and not just the desire for the sacraments which eventually moved Wesley. He noted in this same letter that he had been asked repeatedly to ordain some of the itinerant preachers but had always refused, not being willing to “violate the established order of the national church” to which he belonged. ⁴ In the end, as he himself stated, the lack of ordained ministers from the Church of England to administer the sacraments compelled him to take a step which he was not compelled to take by Methodists’ earlier desire for sacraments from their own preachers.

Wesley’s eventual provision of ordination among the ranks of Methodist itinerants gave American Methodists the building material to form a new church at the 1784 Christmas Conference. The first Discipline printed after the Christmas Conference was very specific on some itinerants’ new sacramental authority: the elders were “to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper” and the deacons were “to baptize in the Absence of an Elder, (and) to assist the Elder in the Administration of the Lord’s Supper.” ⁵ America Methodists now had access to baptism and the Lord’s Supper from the hands of their own preachers.

The natural question is one of frequency: how often did the new elders and deacons administer the sacraments? In particular, how frequent was

⁴ Wesley, Sunday Service, 38.
⁵ Methodist Episcopal Church, Minutes of several conversations between the Rev. Thomas Coke, L.L.D., the Rev. Francis Asbury and others at a conference, begun in Baltimore, in the state of Maryland on Monday, the 27th of December, in the Year 1784. Composing a form of discipline for the ministers, preachers and other members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America (Philadelphia: Charles Cist, 1785). This is reproduced in Tigert, Constitutional History, 550.
the Lord's Supper celebrated in 18th-century American Methodism? The remainder of this paper will re-evaluate this issue. The first section will present the position of current scholarship, particularly the seminal work of William Nash Wade, with a reconsideration of the same. The reconsideration will be based on a perceived methodological flaw in previous treatments, the ignoring of polity and organizational considerations. These considerations will provide the basis for an alternate view in the final section. This alternative view will highlight a quarterly pattern for reception and a weekly pattern for administration.

The Frequency of the Lord's Supper in Early American Methodism: The State of the Question

At the same time Wesley sent over the newly ordained Coke, Whatcoat, and Vasey, he also sent a revised version of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. Wesley edited and sent this book, titled, The Sunday Service of the Methodists in the United States of America, to be the standard liturgy for American Methodists. With it he sent the letter, mentioned above, which gave his rationale for ordaining these men and also his instructions for use of the Sunday Service. One sentence of these instructions in particular pertains directly to the question of eucharistic frequency among early American Methodists: "I also advise the elders to administer the supper of the Lord on every Lord's day."6

Because of this sentence, many recent scholars have argued that Wesley intended the Lord's Supper to be the central element in Sunday worship for all American Methodists. For example, William Nash Wade, in his seminal dissertation on American Methodist worship, uses this same sentence to argue that Wesley intended for Sunday worship always to include the Lord's Supper.7

Wade builds his case on three factors. The first is his interpretation of the instruction's language. Wade focuses on the temporal aspect of the sentence ("every Lord's day") to reconstruct Wesley's intent. The resulting extrapolation is for Wade a clear statement of Wesleyan intent to re-establish a primitive practice of a weekly eucharist.

Wesley had introduced in his 1784 Sunday Service a fundamental reform when he, in accordance with the practice he believed to be that of the early Christian Church of the Apostolic Age, demanded that not only a service of the Word as found in Morning and Evening Prayer but also a weekly eucharist be normative for American Methodist worship.8 (emphasis his)

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6Wesley, Sunday Service, 39.
7William Nash Wade, "A History of Public Worship in the Methodist Episcopal Church and Methodist Episcopal Church, South, from 1784 to 1905" (Ph.D. diss., Notre Dame, 1981), 86.
The second factor in Wade's argument is the use of Wesley's sermon "The Duty of Constant Communion." For Wade, this sermon reveals Wesley's mind about very frequent communion, reinforcing the weekly norm seen established in the 1784 letter. In the sermon, Wade argues, Wesley stated that "constant communion" was the teaching and practice of the apostolic age. Thus Wade fuses Wesley's 1784 letter and this sermon to argue that the Sunday Service was Wesley's attempt to restore the primitive practice of weekly eucharist among American Methodists.

The third factor of Wade's reasoning is Wesley's own example of very frequent communion. Following the conclusions of Thomas H. Barratt, Wade states that Wesley's own example provides the criteria for understanding "constant communion." Wade accepts Barratt's conclusions that on average Wesley received the Lord's Supper about once every five days. This high frequency therefore reveals Wesley's intent in the 1784 instruction: Wesley, himself shaped by a high eucharistic theology and piety, wished to bequeath the same to his American progeny by establishing weekly Eucharist as the norm for Sunday worship.

From this reconstruction of Wesley's 1784 intent, Wade casts a disparaging eye on liturgical revisions made at the 1792 Conference. Wade portrays 1792 as a watershed for the status of the Lord's Supper in early American Methodism. In 1792 Wesley's intent of weekly eucharist was destroyed. Wade's description is poignant. The eucharist,

... officially ceased to be a weekly event and an integral element of common Sunday worship for American Methodists... the Lord's Supper was relegated from its primary position for weekly Sunday worship in American Methodism's first Book of Worship... the essential aspect of sacramental eucharistic worship so vigorously championed by Wesley was supplanted by an evangelistic informal and unordered Word service in which the Sermon alone, not Word and Sacrament, was to be the normative standard.

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9 The sermon can be found in The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 3:428-439. Wesley originally wrote the sermon in 1732 "for the use of my pupils at Oxford." Edited by Wesley, it was published in the Arminian Magazine for May and June, 1787.
14 This conference does seem to have seen the death knell for the Sunday Service. At that time the various rites in it were abridged and appended to the Discipline. Completely omitted were the orders for morning and evening prayer as well as the calendrical and lectionary material. The 1792 Discipline also outlined alternate brief orders for morning, afternoon, and evening services which were not based on the Sunday Service.
Thus the 1792 changes, destroying the intended Wesleyan norm, instituted a new "normative official pattern" of non-sacramental worship.\(^{16}\) After 1792, according to Wade, Wesley's original intent lay dead in the water. By so portraying the changes in 1792 as a very radical shift, Wade wants to say that weekly eucharist was achieved in some places after 1784. At one point he does state that weekly eucharist was the official norm "if not in fact the actual worship practice of American Methodists."\(^{17}\) Surely if Wesley advised weekly eucharist, at least some American Methodists would have obeyed.\(^{18}\)

Wade's culprit for the 1792 debacle and the displacement of the Eucharist is Francis Asbury, whose supposedly low sacramental piety was the main obstacle to achieving Wesley's intent. He wonders why Asbury as bishop would have dared not to follow Wesley's expressed worship standards.\(^{19}\) According to Wade, Asbury is at fault for tainting American Methodism with a low eucharistic piety and an infrequent eucharistic practice. Wade notes sourly that the standard of non-sacramental worship has continued to be the norm until the present.\(^{20}\) Here Wade shows his polemical bias in reconstructing early Methodist liturgical history. He is much too eager to find a golden Wesleyan ideal by which he can argue for weekly eucharist as a viable norm for contemporary Methodists.\(^{21}\) As will be seen below, the result of this bias is a misreading of eucharistic frequency, intended and actual.

Wade's conclusions on the matter, that Wesley intended weekly eucharist for American Methodists and that some Methodist societies actually had weekly Eucharist, are similar to those drawn by other scholars.\(^{22}\)

**Reconsidering the Frequency Question**

Despite the intensity with which it is argued, Wade's conclusion for weekly eucharist is not compelling. He overlooks one important detail of early Methodist polity which makes weekly reception of the Lord's Supper an impossibility: the itinerancy of all elders in early Methodism.


\(^{18}\)Wade, "A History of Public Worship," 187. Wade sees Philadelphia and New York city as being those places where Wesley's intent might actually have been practiced. He gives no primary documentation.


\(^{21}\)I eagerly hasten to add here that I agree fully with his desire to see weekly Eucharist become the norm for modern Methodists. However, I differ in that I believe this restoration should be done for theological reasons and not on a basis of trying to restore a golden historical era.

Considering this itinerant nature for the ordained clergy provides an alternative view: because elders by polity were travelling preachers, the average lay Methodist in a society would not have had the opportunity for weekly reception of the eucharist. This would have been so even if the elders followed to the letter Wesley’s instruction to administer the eucharist “every Lord’s day.” Itinerancy means absence, the absence of the ordained itinerant, and thus, for the average Methodist in early America, less than a weekly opportunity to receive the eucharist.

The crucial matter is whether Wesley intended for the ordained American preachers to be itinerant or not. If Wesley clearly intended for the American preachers who were to be ordained to remain itinerant, then this intent for itinerancy has to be recognized to understand properly his intent for the eucharistic frequency among American Methodists. A desire by Wesley for an itinerant clergy would be in direct conflict with a supposed intent for weekly eucharist. If Wesley meant for the new American elders to be itinerant, this itinerancy wipes out any Wesleyan “norm” for weekly reception of the eucharist.

From the available evidence, it does appear that Wesley not only desired that elders would be itinerants, but also directed it. 23 This direction was expressed in a letter which Wesley sent to Asbury in October, 1784. In this letter Wesley explained his actions in ordaining Coke and then indicated the manner of ordination which he expressly wanted to avoid for the new American Methodist clergy. In particular Wesley did not want preachers to become independents, gathering congregations for themselves, nor did he want preachers “procuring Ordination in a regular way and accepting parochial cures.” 24 Wesley feared the Americans’ acquiring a means of ordination which would have struck at key Methodist polity distinctives: independence would have been a blow to the connectional system and “accepting parochial cures” would surely have negated the itinerancy. Simply put, Wesley desired for the new elders to continue to be itinerant. Therefore, he would not also construct a strict model of weekly eucharistic reception for every Methodist society in America.

Wesley’s desire for ordained clergy to remain itinerant is also found in some changes he made to the Book of Common Prayer to develop the Sunday Service. In particular, his changes to the ordination rites anticipate an itinerant clergy. Wesley altered the ordination rite for deacons, for example, to systematically eliminate any parochial context for the deacons’ specific duties. 25 Similarly, Wesley dropped the references to parish “cures”

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in the new rite for ordaining elders and substituted another term more congenial to itinerancy. Instead of promising to assume responsibility for a "cure", American elders pledged to care for their "districts." Thus, the ordination rites in the *Sunday Service* are consonant with an itinerant ministry: ordained clergy neither restricted to nor expected to be in any one parish but free to travel. Anticipating and intending that the American clergy would remain itinerant, Wesley created the *Sunday Service* as a book "intended for itinerant preachers in the process of gathering congregations rather than for established clergy in parish churches."

That Wesley intended for the newly ordained to be itinerant is not surprising considering the background leading up to Wesley's decision to provide ordination for the Americans. In the letter of instruction attached to the *Sunday Service*, Wesley noted that he had been asked repeatedly to ordain some of the *travelling preachers*. Perhaps Wesley had in mind Asbury's requests prior to 1784, which were specifically for ordained itinerants: "If we had an itinerant clergyman all our wants of ordinances would be supplied, but such a clergyman is a miracle; we have had but two in an age, yourself and Mr. Whitefield." Given this background to his 1784 decision, surely Wesley anticipated that the new elders would be itinerant and thus not able to give the Lord's Supper...even if they were administering it weekly.

Thus, proper interpretation of Wesley's 1784 directive for the elders to administer the Lord's Supper every Lord's Day has to take itinerancy into consideration. Rather than providing a precise liturgical model for every local Methodist society, Wesley's instruction becomes nothing more than a reminder that the elders should accomplish regularly the task for which they were ordained. Since he had gone to the trouble of providing ordained ministers, then let those ordained ministers use fully their sacramental authority. In like manner, "The Duty of Constant Communion" should not be read too expansively. Wesley's homiletical standard was for reception as often as the opportunity presented itself, nothing more.

Grabner, "A Commentary on the Rites of *An Ordinal, The United Methodist Church*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1983), 23-5. Grabner agrees with Outler that the ordination rites in the *Sunday Service* lack parochial references but disagrees with whether this indicates an intent to make deacons part of the itinerant ministry. However, Grabner does appear to understate Wesley's intent for a constant itinerancy, given the letter cited above and the strict connection of ordination to itinerancy in the early *Disciplines*.

See the rites compared in Nolan B. Harmon, *The Rites and Ritual of Episcopal Methodism* (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1926), 356.

This is James White's assessment in the introduction to Wesley, *Sunday Service*, 9. White also notes (p. 10) that the *Sunday Service* presumed little in the way of music and architecture. Again these adjustments are reasonable if Wesley intended for the *Sunday Service* to be used by itinerant clergy.


specific than that. "The Duty of Constant Communion" nowhere mandated precisely a weekly reception.

This scenario highlights several crucial distinctions to be made in understanding early Methodist worship. As noted above, the first is between the weekly administration by the itinerating elders and the opportunity for weekly reception on the part of the Methodist society members. Because of itinerancy, no society could have had a weekly celebration of the eucharist even if the elders administered every Sunday. Building on this first distinction, another crucial distinction which must be made is between Wesley's ideal for eucharistic frequency, his real intent for the American Methodists, and their actual practice. Wade unfortunately confuses these. In actuality Wesley's realistic intent for the Americans was nothing more than a reasonable provision for the sacraments in general, given the connection between itinerancy and ordination.

As the new church organized itself, the intent for itinerating clergy was strictly followed. All the elders, by background and by organizational design, were itinerants. Thus, because they were not accessible to every Methodist on every Sunday, in actual practice weekly eucharist (understood as the opportunity to receive) was simply not a possibility. Wade's lack of primary documentation of actual weekly eucharists can be explained on this basis: because of the thoroughgoing restriction of ordination to itinerant preachers, they did not exist.

The early lists of elders reveal that they were all drawn from the ranks of itinerant preachers. Indeed, not only were they itinerant in background, but the initial group of elders were pulled from the itinerants serving as Assistants. Of the thirteen elders ordained at the Christmas Conference, all had been Assistants before and twelve were currently serving as Assistants, having been appointed to that capacity during the annual conferences in the previous Spring. Of the additional six elders listed in the 1785 Conference minutes, four were serving as Assistants. Thus, a strong continuity existed between those already serving in a specialized role among the itinerants and those who gained authority to administer the sacraments. In fact, there was historical background for the desire for the Assistants to be the ones with sacramental authority. In a 1780 letter to Wesley, Asbury noted that the "violence" in Virginia and North Carolina had been "for assistants introducing the ordinances." 32

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31An Assistant was the itinerant preacher charged with supervision of the societies and other preachers within a circuit. The information for the initial group of elders can be found in Minutes of the Methodist conferences, annually held in America: from 1773–1813, inclusive (New York: D. Hitt and T. Ware, 1813), 44, 51. Before 1784 Assistants usually constituted between one-third to one-half of all itinerants.
This continuity between Assistants and elders suggests a particular interpretation for the 1784 Christmas Conference and for the early polity of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Ordination was not imposed on virgin ground but was grafted onto already existing, highly valued patterns and organizations. Thus, for instance, the distinction between itinerant and local preachers was kept in the Disciplines after 1784. What was new after 1784 was that some of the itinerant preachers—but not all and not any of the local preachers—were ordained to administer the sacraments. To ignore the continuity in American Methodism before and after Christmas Conference is to create a false impression about early American Methodist worship, the Sunday Service, and its instructions.

Thus, given the continuity in polity before and after 1784, the early polity maintains an itinerant nature for the elders in the organization of the fledgling church. Specifically, early Disciplines of the Methodist Episcopal Church assigned to the elders districts through which they were to travel. This itinerancy through an appointed district was listed as the first duty of an elder. Within his respective district the elder was charged with two additional functions: administering the sacraments and serving as the administrative extension for the bishop.

Indeed the elders' ability to exercise sacramental authority depended directly upon their actual itinerancy. If they located, they were not “to exercise any of the peculiar Functions of those Offices” without permission of the Conference “under the Hand of a Superintendent,” i.e., bishop. A failure to comply was supposed to result in immediate expulsion. Surely the “peculiar Functions” of an elder would include sacramental administration. Even as the polity saw development of a distinctive office of the Presiding Elder (an elder responsible for a district in contrast to one

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33This fusion was not without its own tensions. For more on the “babel” created by this fusion of several Methodist “languages” see Russell E. Richey, Early American Methodism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), xvi ff.
34A district was composed of several preaching circuits. Whereas any sort of itinerant might be appointed to a circuit, only elders were appointed to the districts. For example, the Minutes for 1785 organize the circuits into twelve districts, each of which has an elder appointed to it. Eight elders were appointed to circuits, two of which were missionary situations in Antigua and Nova Scotia. See Minutes from 1773–1813, 53–55.
35Methodist Episcopal Church, A Form of Discipline, for the Ministers, Preachers, and Members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America (New York: W. Ross, 1787), 8. Eventually as the number of elders greatly exceeded the number of districts the office of presiding elder developed. For more information on the development of this office see Fred W. Price, “The Role of the Presiding Elder in the Growth of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1784–1832” (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1987), 44ff. Nonetheless sacramental authority remained directly tied to itinerancy for all elders. See footnote 37 below.
361787 Discipline, 8.
37These are the provisions made in the 1785 Minutes, reproduced in Tigert, Constitutional History, 552–3. The initial rule was the same for deacons.
without district responsibilities), sacramental authority remained tied to itinerancy for all elders.\textsuperscript{38}

The elders’ itinerant status and the emergence of districts are revealed in early statistical records. Elders were always a minority of itinerant preachers. This paucity itself argues against the possibility of actual weekly reception of the Eucharist. For example, after the Christmas Conference there were only fifteen elders for all of North America (the thirteen ordained at Christmas Conference and Whatcoat and Vasey, whom Wesley had ordained and sent with Coke). In the ten years after the Christmas Conference, elders never constituted more than 37\% of all itinerants.\textsuperscript{39}

In fact, the number of elders in relationship to the number of circuits and to the number of Methodists would seem to support the exact opposite of Wade’s thesis as the ratio of elders to these other numbers increased in the ten years following the Christmas Conference. Numbers for these years are as follows:\textsuperscript{40}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th># of elders</th>
<th># of districts</th>
<th># of itinerants total</th>
<th># of circuits</th>
<th># of Methodists in societies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1785</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1786</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>20,681</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1787</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>25,842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1788</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>37,354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1789</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>43,262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1790</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>57,631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1791</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>76,153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1792</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>65,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1793</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>269</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>67,643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1794</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>66,308</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before 1792 (the year when Wade argues the Conference officially depreciated the eucharist) elders never constituted more than 30\% of the total number of itinerants. Before 1792 the ratio of elders to society members ranged from a low of 1:860 in 1790 to a high of 1:1,698 in 1787.

\textsuperscript{38}Methodist Episcopal Church, \textit{The Methodist Discipline of 1798 Including the Annotations of Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury}, ed. Frederick A. Norwood (Rutland: Academy Books, 1979), 46, 54.

\textsuperscript{39}Early Methodist leaders were well aware of what a small percentage of the total itinerants that the ordained clergy constituted. See the letter of Thomas Coke to Samuel Seabury, Philadelphia, May 14, 1791, published with \textit{A Letter to a Methodist}, 4th ed. (Baltimore: George Lycett, 1869), 44.

\textsuperscript{40}Minutes from 1773-1813, 51-147.
A Reconsideration of the Frequency of the Eucharist

(For 1785, the first statistics available after Christmas Conference, elders made up only 18% of all itinerants; their ratio to Methodists in society was 1:947). Simply put, there were never sufficient elders to provide an opportunity for weekly reception of the eucharist. This is particularly true in the first years after 1784, when Wade implies that weekly eucharist had the greatest possibility of being practiced. If anything, the numbers suggest a greater possibility for weekly eucharist after 1792 rather than before.

Therefore, there is support for neither an intended nor an actual weekly reception of the eucharist in 18th-century American Methodism. Because of the elders' itinerant nature, their organizational status, and actual numbers, weekly reception of the eucharist was an impossibility in early American Methodism. Weekly reception would have to wait until a time when original polity structures changed and ordained itinerants located.

The Quarterly Alternative for Frequency

If itinerancy did not allow for the possibility of receiving the eucharist every week, then a reasonable alternative must be found which accurately takes into account the elders' traveling nature. The most likely alternative for actual frequency is quarterly, particularly in connection with quarterly meetings within the circuits.

For several reasons, quarterly meetings appear to be a reasonable choice for locating regular communions in early American Methodism. Their relative infrequency would be consonant with itinerant clergy. Moreover, their typical ritual pattern was conducive to including the Eucharist. Quarterly meetings appear to have a common two-day pattern centering on Saturdays and Sundays. This two day pattern antedates the Christmas Conference, first appearing officially in the 1780 Minutes: "Quest. 18. Shall we recommend our quarterly meetings to be held on Saturdays and Sundays when convenient? Ans. Agreed." Usually Sunday, the second day, started with the love feast, after which came the Lord's Supper from 1784 onward. The day concluded with an afternoon of preaching. Many early journals and autobiographies attest to celebration of the Eucharist at quarterly meetings.

While some scholars have recognized the connection between the eucharist and quarterly meetings, the connection has been portrayed as evidence of a low sacramental piety and of the eucharist's non-central role.

41 Notice that before the end of the eighteenth century the responsibility for quarterly meetings had shifted from the deacons to the presiding elders. See Methodist Discipline of 1798, 46, 50.
42 Minutes from 1773–1813, 26.
in early Methodist worship.\textsuperscript{44} In fact, the exact opposite might be the case. Placement of the Eucharist within the rhythm of quarterly meetings might actually reflect the high regard early Methodists had for the eucharist. As noted by Russell Richey, early quarterly meetings were far more than mere business meetings. They carried deep symbolic significance, serving as occasions when Methodism visibly constituted itself as a church, redeemed and redeeming.\textsuperscript{45} Revival among non-society members often followed quarterly meetings because it was there that “Methodism dramatized itself as a gracious vessel.”\textsuperscript{46} Surely the Lord’s Supper was part of this drama of grace and redemption in these affairs.

Wade’s thesis that a significant eucharist for early Methodism must be a weekly eucharist is not only factually incorrect but undermines a proper understanding of the eucharist’s role and frequency in its true historical context. Twentieth century sensibilities about the eucharist must not be allowed to get in the way of reconstructing this essential part of early Methodist worship. Indeed, imposing these modern sensibilities about the Eucharist might make one underappreciate the eucharist’s true role in early Methodism. Early American Methodism was a movement which clamored for the sacraments. To say that, once they got the sacraments, their quarterly “infrequency” actually showed a low appreciation for the eucharist, is nothing more than substituting contemporary expectations for the actual past.


\textsuperscript{45}Richey, \textit{Early American Methodism}, 27.

\textsuperscript{46}Richey, \textit{Early American Methodism}, 29.