CATHOLIC YEARNINGS:  
THE DISCUSSION OF APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION AND 
ORDAINED MINISTRY IN THE VERSICLE  
MARK WESLEY STAMM  

Organized in 1946, the Order of Saint Luke understood itself as "a liturgical and sacramental fellowship of Methodist ministers." Romey P. Marshall (1901–1985) was its co-founder, first President, and leading exemplar. Reared in a Kentucky Methodist family, Marshall had learned the traditions of the holiness movement, adopting many of its evangelistic practices and liturgical presuppositions. He witnessed to another type of "conversion," the one that led him to form the Order:

The Order of Saint Luke was not formed by men who became interested in Liturgy because of their liking for beauty or their desire to follow tradition. Each of the founders had at first been rebels against tradition as we understood it. . . . We had used all sorts of techniques in an effort to attract crowds and save souls. But each of us had come to an appreciation of historic liturgy and a belief in the Church as a Divine Institution, and a conviction that the Sacraments were, in the deepest sense of the word, "means of grace." 2

With that insight, Marshall and others began a movement that sought to magnify the more objective, churchly aspects of the Wesleyan heritage.

Marshall was always aware, however, that the goal he sought was as elusive as it was attractive. To borrow Wesley's phraseology, he was moving toward a vision of ecclesiastical "perfection." Could it be reached in this life? A classic expression of that movement is found in his description of the procession held at the 1948 meeting of the "Catholic Conference" of the Protestant Episcopal Church. He wrote,

It was my first experience in such a procession and I enjoyed the pageantry which we Methodists have seldom used. An amusing incident occurred as I found myself at almost the head of the group of around 700 clergy and began to wonder if the place of honor was at the head or the end. As I mounted the steps and looked back, I remembered that in church processions the dignitaries always came last—and I was at least two blocks away from that point. I suppose that showed my standing with my Episcopal brethren! But seriously, it was an honor to be placed among the representatives of the Anglican Orders, and I shall be happy to take my position again at the head of the line... 3

1 The Order is no longer exclusively clergy and Methodist. Now it describes itself as "A religious order within the United Methodist Church dedicated to sacramental and liturgical scholarship, education, and practice."
One detects here the romanticism typical of many high church movements and perhaps a desire for the social affirmation afforded by the Episcopalian establishment. On a more profound level, however, Marshall's comments reveal a "catholic yearning:" that is, a desire to benefit from historic and objective manifestations of church, ministry, and spirituality such as the historic episcopate.

As it is used in this article, the term "catholic" does not follow John Wesley's usage in the sermon "Catholic Spirit." There, "catholic" refers to an evangelical union of warm-hearted souls. The definition employed in this article is that implied by the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, where "catholic" refers to a visible institutional reality holding classical assumptions about sacramental forms and efficacy.

This article will focus on "catholic yearnings" such as that expressed by Marshall. It will review and analyze the discussion of apostolic succession and ordained ministry as it appeared in *The Versicle* (1951–1965), the first newsletter/journal of the Order of Saint Luke. The Order's recent golden anniversary has been an important stimulus for such historical investigations. This article will advance that small, yet growing, body of research. Also, it provides an historical case study on a recurring Methodist challenge—How does the church live in that tension between classical ecclesial forms and the need for flexibility in response to the Spirit's call? *When one investigates that tension, one studies the very heart of Methodist identity.* Both of these commitments—to classical forms and to charismatic flexibility—are manifested in the pages of *The Versicle*.

How do their concerns relate to the Wesleyan corpus? To address that question, we will make a short review of John Wesley's teaching on apostolic succession and the ordained ministry.

II

Commentators such as Frank Baker and Henry Rack have demonstrated the ambivalence in John Wesley's relationship with the Church of England. He preached in the open air within the parishes administered by other clergy. He appointed lay preachers and organized the Annual Conference. He established the Deed of Declaration, named "the Legal One-hundred," and encouraged the building of Methodist chapels. He revised the Prayer Book. Indeed, he contradicted numerous canons and traditions of the church, all the while

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claiming to be its loyal son. At no point did he challenge those traditions more than in his ordinations. While it is technically correct that he lived and died within the Church of England, the developments noted here were not typical manifestations of loyalty.

Nevertheless, Wesley's insistence that his was a deeper loyalty is not without merit. He stood with the English Reformers, who sought a biblically literate Christian Commonwealth. His decision to preach in the fields and organize circuits was an attempt to fulfill such a vision, to proclaim "the acceptable year of the Lord" to everyone. His teaching on "constant communion" reflects a similar dynamic. He affirmed the church's teaching that required thrice annual communion as a bare minimum, but refused to sanction that pattern as the ideal.

Wesley's decision to ordain elders for America was rooted in his commitment to the eucharist; but standing in the way of such ordinations was the Anglican tradition of the apostolic succession—the claim that valid ordination must come at the hands of a bishop whose consecration can be traced directly to the apostles themselves. Wesley held to a similar form of the apostolic succession during the early phases of his ministry, to the extent that he rebaptized many who came into the Church of England from other churches. Eventually, he dropped that position. One can cite several reasons for the change, not least of them being the effectiveness of his lay preachers and the growing realization that Methodism was an "extraordinary" movement inspired by the Holy Spirit, one not bound by conventional rubrics. His reading of Lord King's Account of the Primitive Church (in 1745) had convinced him "that bishops and presbyters are the same order, and consequently have the same right to ordain." He did not reject the doctrine of apostolic succession, but rather he accepted the Presbyterian understanding of it. At times, however, he took a more radical position, insisting that "the uninterrupted succession (is) a fable."

In either case, such reasoning undermined his commitment to the Anglican praxis of ordination and prepared him to undertake the ordinations of September 1784. His justification was missional—he ordained because the

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9 See Rack, 305.
14 Baker, 324.
16 The Letters of John Wesley, August 19, 1785 (to Charles Wesley), Vol. VIII, 284.
American Methodists lacked access to the sacraments. In the face of a perceived need, Methodists will characteristically "(submit) to 'be more vile,'" as Wesley did when he began preaching in the open air. It is worth noting, however, that the well-known "I submitted to 'be more vile'" reference is drawn from the biblical scene in which King David danced half naked before the Ark of God (see 2 Samuel 6:22, KJV). It is a telling allusion. Characteristically, Methodists are willing to take risks in order to reach the masses, even to the point of appearing ridiculous and disorderly. Nevertheless, by taking such risks, sometimes they leave themselves ecclesiastically ill-clad, clothing their ministers with little but a sense of their own charisma.

As they consider churches that have retained the historic succession, especially the Anglican Communion, some Methodists have asked themselves, what did we lose when Wesley stepped outside of the succession to ordain preachers? Can we regain what we lost without losing our missional flexibility and freedom? These were the questions driving the discussion of apostolic succession and ordained ministry as it unfolded in *The Versicle*. We will turn now to that discussion, giving special attention to articles and commentary by President Romey P. Marshall and two other prominent leaders, David L. Taylor and Lawrence Guderian.

III

The inaugural edition of *The Versicle*, edited by David Taylor, was dated Epiphany, 1951. *Questions about apostolic succession and ordained ministry appear in the first article*. That article, "Priesthood" by Daniel L. Marsh, was a reprint of an article done twelve years earlier for a Methodist Course of Study School. Reprinted articles, of course, can reveal as much about the bias of the editor (in this case, Taylor) as they do about the opinions and conclusions of the author (Marsh).

Marsh reported on the decision made by the 1939 Methodist Uniting Conference to grant unordained clergy "under certain conditions the right to administer the Holy Eucharist." He argued against both lay presidency at the Lord's Supper and the necessity of apostolic succession:

One does not have to accept the extreme theories of sacerdotalism in order to be desirous of keeping the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper sacredly significant. And one does not need to accept the Roman Catholic and High Anglican theories of apostolic succession to advocate ordination as a prerequisite for the full discharge of the ministerial office.

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17 *The Letters of John Wesley*, September 10, 1784.
19 See W. Reginald Ward's footnote #91 on page 46 of the Abingdon Wesley Works, volume 19.
20 Taylor, a Methodist pastor from Illinois, would continue as the editor through the Spring 1960 edition.
Then, he repeated Wesley's maxim that "The doctrine of apostolic succession is a fable..." Taylor used Marsh to address both problems historically related to the Methodist ministry: (1) Its break with Anglican/Catholic orders; and (2) The theological and ecclesial problems related to its irregular, non-ordained ministers.

Apostolic succession was rejected yet ordination was affirmed. Marsh insisted that the "minister of Christ" needs formal training and induction (i.e., ordination) into his office. Conversely, allowing non-ordained persons to fulfill the functions of the ordained undercuts the concept of ordination altogether. He wrote,

The logic of allowing a man to perform all of the functions of the minister, including the administering of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, without ordination is: "Why be ordained at all?" The inevitable logic of the action taken at Kansas City...is to do away with ordination altogether. 23

In rejecting apostolic succession while affirming ordination, Marsh (Taylor) staked out an important middle position—indeed the Wesleyan position—while leaving a primary question unanswered: How does Methodism accomplish its peculiar mission without an irregular ministry? An additional question was not asked: If the Anglican understanding of apostolic succession was rejected in the events of 1784, then why were some Methodists still arguing about it more than a century and a half later? The Marsh article gave no definitive answers to these questions, but it established apostolic succession and ordained ministry as important subjects for The Versicle.

In a 1954 editorial, Taylor commented,

Some (Episcopalians) who are friendliest to Methodism and the Order are Anglo-Catholic, even though our ideas of succession are more in accord with low-church leanings, or even Presbyterian. 24

His understanding of the difference between those Anglo-Catholic and Methodist ideas was set forth in a subsequent 1954 article entitled "How Catholic Can We Get?" Taylor was responding to a letter which claimed that the Order was moving from its Anglican heritage "toward (a) catholicism of the Roman variety." 25

But how does one define "catholic"? Taylor illustrated the problem by enumerating a number of "catholic" practices he had witnessed in Methodist settings. He wrote, "I have found the crucifix and statues of the Virgin Mother in not a few parsonages." Some ministers genuflect or make the sign of the

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22 Marsh, 1.
23 Marsh, 7.
25 David L. Taylor, "How Catholic Can We Get?" The Versicle 4:3 (Kingdomtide 1954), 4–7, 15–16.
cross “at least in private.” Others use incense, establish confessionals, use Latin anthems, and “celebrate the Eucharist frequently and if need be, semi-privately.” He also mentioned an increase in the following: (1) appreciation of the Real Presence in the eucharist, (2) use of “devotional aids including the classics,” and (3) desire for ecumenical union, especially with the Protestant Episcopal Church.” Taylor offered an eclectic, confusing list of “catholic” examples. Clear definition was necessary, which he sought to provide.

He began with the traditional Wesleyan definition of catholic as “universal or ecumenical,” then he advanced three more strictly nuanced meanings. According to Taylor, there are three types of catholicism expressed in the liturgical movement—“(the) esthetic, the antiquarian, and the dialectical.” “Esthetic” catholicism concerns itself with “enriching worship,” importing “high altars, sanctuary lamps, and clergy collars” into congregations that do not believe and/or practice the spiritual realities toward which those symbols point. “Antiquarian” catholicism is “an escape from the secularism of the day, (glorying) in what is old simply because it is old.” According to Taylor, the only defensible catholicism is the “dialectical,” a movement in dialog with the symbols and liturgical forms of the historic church(es) but with a focused purpose—that the church may be one, that the church’s liturgical and sacramental mission be fulfilled. He wrote,

It, too, is interested in going back to the Primitive Church and in adopting means that are esthetically inspiring, but only that in returning to the treasures of the ages and the treasures of all Christians, we may be pulled together into a Body of Christ which is not disjuncted . . . .

Taylor argued that the catholicism of the primitive church is admirable; but, a “hyphenated” Catholicism (i.e., “Old, Anglo, or Roman”) is not necessary. Methodists should be catholic in their acceptance of the Apostles, and Nicene Creeds and in their understanding of the Real Presence, but they should not accept “such Roman aberrations as services in a strange language; (and) transubstantiation . . . .”

He took up the issues of Methodist ordination and the apostolic succession, asking “How catholic can we get in our ministry?” Methodists, he insisted, cannot accept the Oxford Movement view on the necessity of apostolic succession “without repudiating our own Methodism”:

In the Order of Saint Luke, we occasionally find a member who considers his orders insufficient, with the result that he leaves Methodism and espouses the Episcopal communion. However, I believe that the only position any loyal Methodist can take is this: we do consider our orders valid in the eyes of God.

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3See John Wesley, “Catholic Spirit,” and the discussion on p. 4 of this article.  
Even if one could prove "a visible, tractable succession of bishops," it would be "as dust and ashes compared to the spiritual succession of the Apostles." Using the classical Wesleyan argument, he insisted that one must judge ministry by its fruit:

... the historic and spiritual results that stem from the presbyterial ordinations of Coke and Asbury have been as wonderful for the Kingdom of God as have the results of any like period of a so-called valid ministry.

For the sake of the ecumenical process, he would "gladly kneel and receive an additional laying-on of hands to supplement the graces of my present ministry."\(^{32}\) He would not allow such a supplemental rite to call into question the validity of his previous ministry, although he did not explain how that could be avoided.

Taylor's Presbyterian understanding of apostolic succession reflects Wesley's logic as does his insistence that fruit borne is the true measure of a spiritual gift. The strength of this argument is obvious. One is free to make an innovative response to missional challenges, and persons with spiritual gifts may freely exercise them. There are, however, some problems inherent in this line of reasoning. The logic of Taylor and Wesley can be used to repudiate ordination altogether, not to mention other "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace."\(^{33}\) Methodists should admit that Wesley's conclusions about ordination are not that far removed from those of Robert Strawbridge. Wesley performed unauthorized ordinations because American Methodists needed the sacraments. For the same reason, Strawbridge baptized and broke bread without benefit of any ordination whatsoever.

In spite of Taylor's arguments to the contrary, some within the Order of St. Luke hoped for inclusion in the apostolic succession held by the Anglican Communion. For such men, the apostolic succession was anything but a "fable." Few of them believed their orders were invalid, for they continued in their various ministries; on the other hand, they sensed something missing. Like Marshall, they wanted to march in procession "with the Anglican Orders" even if that meant standing at the head of the line.\(^{34}\) Gaining a permanent invitation to that "procession," however, was not a simple matter. How could one gain the catholic benefits enjoyed by the Episcopal Church without giving up one's secure, if moderately impoverished, place in the Methodist Conference? There were no simple solutions. Thus, Anglican ordination became something of a siren song as well as a difficult problem to be solved. Lawrence Guderian was the primary example of one trying to wrestle with the dilemma.

\footnote{Taylor, "How Catholic Can We Get?," 15.}

\footnote{Indeed, at one point in his article (p. 6), Taylor flirted with a leap of logic that would leave the means of grace behind entirely. Outward forms and symbols, he wrote, are "crutches." Quakers can set aside such forms, he argued, because "they have achieved a higher spiritual life."}

\footnote{See discussion on page 3 of this article.}
Lawrence Guderian was the Order’s correspondent from the 1956 General Conference. As his report indicates, he went to the meeting with high expectations, but left disappointed:

One might hope for a General Conference mightily humbled by a consciousness of the Historic Church so each expression becomes freighted with its significance.

Instead of concerning itself with “worship and liturgies” and the “possible recognition of Methodist orders in the Protestant Episcopal Church,” these matters “went into the background.” In their place, Guderian complained, the Conference spent considerable time discussing the abolition of the Central Jurisdiction and granting full Conference membership rights to qualified women.

Guderian saw the former as a waste of time and the latter as a departure from the apostolic norm. He wrote, “we all know that one does not find harmony between people, regardless of color, by simple legislation. This is a task legislation cannot do.” Guderian’s comment reflected that of many Americans, churched and otherwise, who lamented segregation but were unwilling to move against it.

He took a more severe tone in his discussion of full clergy rights for women. This was, he wrote, “an unfortunate issue,” a “(departure) from historic practice.” One should remember “that Jesus chose twelve men.” He continued,

This (caution against their ordination) is not to suggest that women are not capable. It is to suggest that even in America the household is known by the father’s name; he is still recognized as the head of the family in most things and in the Church it should be no different.

These objections were related to Guderian’s ecclesiastical agenda. Full clergy rights for women, he insisted, “gives us another hurdle to cross in our eventual recognition of orders with our Protestant Episcopal sister church.” He mused, “One wonders if the historical reasons for keeping the priesthood a male calling were surveyed at all.” Indeed, Guderian’s argument departed from the historic Wesleyan norm which claims that fruit borne and spiritual gifts exhibited are the primary issues in deciding one’s worthiness to serve.

A reading of the transcripts from that Conference indicates that an important historical/spiritual event was unfolding, yet Guderian did not report it as such. Charles Smith urged Methodists to abolish their version of racial segregation, the Central Jurisdiction:

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35 Like many of the Order’s leaders in the early period, Guderian filled several roles. He served as the Publisher of The Versicle from 1953 through 1961. In the wider church, he was pastor, District Superintendent, and Secretary of the Oregon Conference as well as director of the Willamette University Press.


37 Guderian, “Minneapolis Impressions,” 2.

38 Guderian, “Minneapolis Impressions,” 2.
Now, Methodism, if it will end segregation (in society), must repudiate the principle of segregation it adopted in 1939—just as the United States Supreme Court repudiated the principle of segregation (which it adopted in 1896) . . . \(^39\)

William Evans countered, insisting that it was wrong for persons to "(confess) each others sin."\(^40\) These men were part of an impassioned debate addressing major issues of Christian praxis: What is sin? What is the proper relationship between Christian brothers and sisters? These were (and are) liturgical issues, seemingly of primary importance to "a liturgical and sacramental fellowship."

A similar discussion ensued on the issues of women's ordination and Annual Conference membership. Dewey Muir asked whether women with husbands and families were appointable.\(^41\) Henry Lambdin clarified the issue, using the classical Wesleyan argument:

\[\text{... is this Conference prepared to say ... that no woman, however well qualified educationally, whatever demonstration she has given of gifts and grace and loveliness, no woman shall be called to God within ... the Annual Conference?}\]

Many of the delegates believed that God was at work in their midst, that significant barriers were about to fall. Viewing the same events, Guderian complained that the delegates had failed to uphold the apostolic faith.

Guderian's report exhibits the potential dark side of High Church movements. Well intentioned appeals to historical continuity can ignore a key teaching of the New Testament—apostolic boldness sometimes requires a departure from historic norms. For example, Galatians is an argument against the circumcision norm, written by an apostle "sent neither by human commission, nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1). Guderian failed to acknowledge that dynamic of apostolicity.\(^43\) Rather, he hoped for a reconciliation of Methodist orders with the Episcopal Church.\(^44\) The General Conference transcripts suggest that most Methodists were not interested in that particular possibility.\(^45\)

In a 1958 article entitled "The Methodist Ministry and the Church Catholic," Guderian argued that Methodism should be understood as part of

\(^39\)Daily Christian Advocate 5:7 (May 2, 1956), 292. See also p. 276.
\(^40\)Daily Christian Advocate 5:7, 294.
\(^41\)Daily Christian Advocate 5:11 (May 7, 1956), 522.
\(^42\)Daily Christian Advocate 5:11, 524.
\(^43\)Some writers appearing in The Versicle reflected this bolder understanding of apostolicity. See the article by Howard Kunkle entitled "Segregation and the Eucharist," 5:2 (Whitsuntide 1955), 7–8, 12. Kunkle insisted that one cannot properly celebrate the eucharist in a racially segregated church.
\(^44\)Guderian, "Minneapolis Impressions," 3.
\(^45\)The report from the Committee on Interdenominational Relations and Activities was handled in perfunctory fashion on the last day of the Conference. See Daily Christian Advocate 5:12 (May 8, 1956), 608.
\(^46\)Lawrence Guderian, "The Methodist Ministry and the Church Catholic," The Versicle 8:2 (Eastertide 1958), 11–16.
“the Church Catholic” and not as a sect. In this understanding, Methodism is a branch of the English Catholic Church, with valid orders in “presbyterial” succession. He wrote, “Our ministry is in succession with the early Church and the Apostles, though interrupted at Wesley and other points.” He did not address the obvious contradiction—how can Methodism claim a succession interrupted by its founder? He remained consistent, however, in his preoccupation with the Church of England—“(she) would do well to examine her own history before she becomes too dogmatic about Wesley’s ‘non-Episcopal’ ordinations” Again, the Church of England and its succession was the problem to be solved.

In that light, Guderian began his 1960 article “The Apostleship in Methodism” with the standard Methodist claim that the “unbroken succession is a fable;” but then he reversed himself, attempting to outdo the Tractarians at their own game. After noting that the Episcopalians “have never recognized the ministry of those who stand at the junction of the ordinations of John Wesley,” he reminded his Anglican brethren that the Orthodox Churches do not recognize them.

Now supposing the Methodists are able to show that they have already received this blessing? Could it be that this has been done in some degree at the foundation of this movement which has been known but ignored because of the additional implications which have been attached to the whole affair? Even though we can at this date put many a question mark on the “pipe line” theory of Succession, there are other values which might come to us if we are able to show that we, Methodists, have a real and unique relationship with the Greek Church which has not been accorded to the Church of England. Guderian proceeded to recount the story of John Wesley and the ordinations administered by one Bishop Erasmus.

In 1763, a “Greek Bishop Erasmus” came to England in destitute condition, and was brought to Wesley for assistance. At Wesley’s request, Erasmus ordained one of the lay preachers, Dr. John Jones. For a short time Wesley looked to Erasmus as the solution to Methodism’s ordination problem. These facts are well documented by Methodist writers and by others, yet Guderian moved well beyond fact and consensus to speculation. He wrote,

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It was rumored that Wesley received something himself during this time. No one seems to know the facts for certain. We do know that following the Jones incident John Wesley began to act with more authority. It may have been only because of the Calvinist-Arminian controversy. It may have been that he did receive something that he dared not divulge to anyone.\(^4\)

Guderian insisted that Erasmus had ordained Wesley a bishop. He cited Samuel Peters to the effect that this clandestine ordination, and not his reading of King, gave Wesley the authority to perform the 1784 ordinations.\(^5\)

Such a conclusion required a significant reinterpretation of events. It is true, wrote Guderian, that Wesley quickly rejected Erasmus as the solution to his continuing ministerial problem, that he expelled from the connection several preachers who paid Erasmus for their ordinations; yet, he noted, Wesley did not reject Jones’ ordination. When rumors arose that Wesley had been ordained bishop, he would not confirm them; yet, noted Guderian, he did not deny them.\(^6\) Moreover, wrote Guderian, had Wesley acknowledged such an irregular ordination to the episcopate, he would have been liable to prosecution under the Praemunire Act.\(^7\) These assertions are correct. The leap of faith came in Guderian’s conclusion: Wesley’s silence amounted to an admission that he had been ordained bishop.\(^8\)

The irony is unmistakable. After repeating Wesley’s assertion that “the unbroken succession is a fable,” Guderian was left with his own alternative “fable,” and his was equally difficult to prove. He acknowledged that problem, while hoping for a revelation that would put doubts to rest:

> We are without definite proof unless some historian someday might produce a certifying document to this strange encounter with the Greek Bishop on the part of John Wesley. We do know, however, that we have a unique place now when we start to discuss this whole matter about Apostolic Succession with those who are certain they have something we do not. It might be well to believe, if you can, that we stand in a much purer form of succession than those who stand against us . . . \(^9\)

As one might expect, Guderian’s article drew a flurry of responses. Marshall printed one of these, an article by Nashotah House professor Carl F. Haskell. Haskell noted a number of problems with Guderian’s conclusions. In particular, he wrote that an Orthodox Bishop administering ordinations in the way described by Guderian would have broken five canons of the church, not the least of these being a prohibition against ordaining persons who are not members of the Orthodox Church. Thus, an ordination of Wesley would have been a schismatic ordination, rendering rather empty the claims to apostolic succession.

\(^8\) Guderian, “The Apostleship in Methodism,” 12.
succession. It is ironic that the Anglo-Catholic professor ended up sounding like the Methodist. Haskell wrote,

Anglicans are far too willing to look upon their Apostles as administrators or great ministers of state and must begin to see them in light of the Church’s Divine structure and commission.

For the sake of argument, what would it mean if Guderian’s “historian” someday appeared carrying such a “certifying document”? Guderian speculated on the possibility of a “relationship” between Methodism and Orthodoxy, yet what is the meaning of an unacknowledged ecclesiastical “relationship”? Moreover, remember how Wesley chided Asbury and Coke when they began using the title “Bishop” instead of “General Superintendent”:

How can you, how dare you suffer yourself to be called Bishop? I shudder, I start at the very thought! Men may call me a knave or a fool, a rascal, a scoundrel, and I am content; but they shall never by my consent call me Bishop!

If Wesley went to his grave publicly denying that he was a bishop, of what good would it be for us to find that he was one, yet in secret? Guderian never raised the question, but we shall do so. Even if Guderian’s historian were to show up with Wesley’s ordination certificate in hand, to claim that it means anything at all for modern Methodism would be ex opere operato logic taken to a ridiculous extreme. Marshall gave a most honest assessment of Guderian’s claim when he said, “if Wesley was indeed a bishop in Apostolic Succession . . . it will be important for ecumenical discussion but it won’t matter much for the average Methodist.”

He spoke from experience. Indeed, on All Saints Day, 1959, a modern encounter had occurred between a Methodist elder and a bishop ordained in apostolic succession. Not unlike the fraudulent Erasmus, this canonical bishop acted in an idiosyncratic manner. Employing seldom used canon 36 of the Episcopal Church, Bishop James Pike had reordained Dr. George Hedley. The chaplain of Mills College and a director of the Order of Saint Luke, Hedley remained a Methodist but through Pike’s hand was now ordained in “the one holy, catholic and apostolic church.” The ordination was not, claimed Pike,

Carl F. Haskell, “Apostleship in Methodism Considered,” The Versicle 11:1 (1961), 7. Haskell drew his information about the five violated canons from the Tsoumas article (see footnote #53). Canons two through five were (2) prohibition against ordaining men who had seceded from their local bishops, (3) prohibition against ordination in secret, (4) insistence that ordination occur within the Divine Liturgy, and (5) prohibition against ordinations administered for money.

Tsoumas provided the most damning piece of evidence—“That Erasmus was not a Greek Bishop becomes manifest from another very important source: the catalogues of the Bishops of Crete.” No Erasmus is listed (see pp. 72–73).

Haskell, 8.


an attempt to question the validity of Hedley’s church or his previous ordination, but rather an attempt to extend Hedley’s effectiveness as a chaplain with a large Episcopalian constituency. David Taylor commented approvingly. Such an “extension . . . on the part of the bishop in the historic succession” is laudable, especially since Hedley’s ordination “is recognized and not canceled or denied.”

Both Pike and Taylor believed that the Hedley reordination would advance ecumenical progress between the two churches, but that did not happen. John Otwell insisted that there could be no such reordination without implying a deficiency in the previous ordination. In spite of hopes to the contrary, the Hedley reordination received little approval, nor did it stimulate much ecumenical progress.

A subsequent piece of commentary by Romey Marshall restated the classical Methodist tension caused by the dual commitment to charismatic endowment and catholic form. In the process, he confessed doubts about the validity of his own ordination, a confession which points to the deeper concern underlying this discussion of apostolic succession.

Marshall’s comments appeared in response to the following question: “If Methodist ministers cannot trace their Orders back to the Apostles, are they really ordained?” That question was not about to go away. Marshall responded with a combination of Presbyterian and Congregational logic:

I would answer that ordination is not mechanical, but spiritual and that the intention of good men to set aside other good men to the work of the ministry is certainly a valid reason for believing that God will honor their work.

Then, he affirmed the “extension” logic used by Pike and Taylor, doing so in his typical homespun style:

Nevertheless, we would be happy to find some way of adjusting our Orders to those of the Anglicans, not to relieve our conscience, but to make them feel better.

Marshall then referred to “a lengthy correspondence with several leaders in the Episcopal Church” regarding such an “adjustment.” The Episcopalians were open to the idea, he said, but his own (Methodist) bishop was not. His bishop insisted that “by even suggesting such a thing I was casting doubt on my Methodist ordination.” Surprisingly, Marshall confessed that he did harbor such doubts:

67 Otwell, 1404.
70 Marshall, “The Liturgical Question Box,” The Versicle 11:9, 12.
I replied (to my bishop) that I had no intention of (seeking reordination), but that I had always wondered whether or not the jolly superintendent who laid hands on my head at the end of a rip-snorting address by one of the South’s leading humorists actually thought he was ordaining me. Knowing his ideas on the subject of the ministry, I doubted if he considered it anything more than a formality, to be hurried through as quickly as possible.  

Questions about apostolic succession aside, did Marshall really doubt whether he had been ordained? If so, he was questioning a fruitful, widely recognized ministry. His critique is more complex and sophisticated than that. He was criticizing a sentimental expression of Methodism that had lost touch with both its sacramental and evangelical roots, for which the “heart strangely warmed” was the result of a good belly laugh rather than a profound encounter with a gracious God. He was criticizing a Methodism that had come to ignore Wesley’s teachings on the means of grace. Marshall and these other writers understood ordained ministry as a visible sign of God’s grace and a means to the same. When they looked to Canterbury and beyond, they looked for yet another way to restore an objective, sacramental understanding of grace to Methodism.

IV

Marshall, Taylor, and Guderian understood the ordained office as necessary to the church’s continuing welfare. Overlooking their various idiosyncrasies, one finds in The Versicle a persistent commitment to that ideal. Taylor insisted that the Methodist ordained ministry is not simply a functional office. If so, clergy would cease to be ordained when they retire. Conversely, if laypersons may preside at the sacraments, then “ordination signifies nothing;” of course, a meaningless ordination was intolerable. No vocation can be despised, he insisted, especially not that exercised by the clergy:

Though I cheer loudly for the democracy we have in our system, I also believe that the time has come for laymen to pay more respect to pastors, and pastors to superintendents and bishops, not because they are high and mighty (do not fawn!) nor because they are good, but because of the task to which God has called them . . .

For Taylor, baptismal equality did not imply a leveling of spiritual authority. Marshall followed a similar line of reasoning, defending the Order’s emphasis on the ordained ministry. He wrote, “Let us firmly, yet gently, remind

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8 In addition to his work in founding the Order of Saint Luke, Marshall enjoyed a distinguished career as pastor and editor-journalist. He was associate editor of the Christian Advocate and served as editor of both the Florida Christian Advocate and the North Carolina Christian Advocate. See obituary by Lawrence W. Lykens, Central Pennsylvania Conference Journal, 1985, 411-12.
our people that we are not laymen hired to look after the church..." With disapproval, he also noted the trend to “permit unordained men to administer the sacraments”:

If ordination accomplishes nothing, means nothing, then let us do away with the meaningless ceremony. It is so much mummery, if there is no power behind it. But there is power. By ordination we are made more than preachers, more than parish visitors, more than business managers. We are stewards of the mysteries of God, priests in the Church of Jesus Christ..."

In Marshall’s words, “we (i.e., clergy) may not be better men, but we are consecrated men, pastors, preachers, and priests of God.” To use the Wesleyan phrase, the ordained are a means of grace. The office is bigger than anyone who holds it.

As this review of The Versicle demonstrates, Methodists will insist on objective manifestations of the Holy Spirit, on “outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.” Nevertheless, this commitment will continue to stand in tension with Methodism’s charismatic and pragmatic commitments. When not properly balanced, however, such pragmatism can become iconoclastic. The “success” of the Willow Creek Community Church, with its rejection of most churchly traditions and forms, provides a new siren song for an institutional Methodism in apparent decline; but, surely, something essential is lost when tradition as a category is branded problematic. Moreover, the modern entrepreneurial understanding of the church continues to place an excessive emphasis on the business and marketing skills of the local leadership; but, what happens when that leadership fails or grows tired?

In the face of this widespread rejection of the traditional, “catholic yearnings” like those expressed in The Versicle remain an important part of the Methodist witness. In the Methodist understanding, the “heart strangely warmed” emerges from a consistent practice of the means of grace. Intimately related to these means, the mission of the Methodist clergy is strengthened when their prophetic work is supported by established institutions and traditional signs—perhaps even a restoration of the apostolic succession itself.

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