

Ordination in the Wesleyan Tradition: Letting the Past Speak to the Present about the Future

The word “tradition” in the title would be a deal-breaker in many quarters, but we DO stand in an ecclesiastical tradition – we are not just a rootless expression of generic evangelicalism – and, in fact, the tradition with which we identify is a great one.

It’s not just that John Wesley’s movement affirms the historic Christian tradition as a whole, although of course it does. Within that larger legacy of all believers, Wesley’s own movement has made its mark as well, taking its place among the major Protestant families of denominations.

So how has our Wesleyan tradition – and specifically, our ecclesiastical branch of that tradition – viewed ordination?

Ordination was a major issue in Wesley’s Methodism.

We start where Wesley started – with Anglican ecclesiology. John Wesley lived and died an Anglican priest. He maintained to his death that Methodism was compatible with the Anglican Church.

Anglicanism endorsed “a specialized ministry of Word, sacrament, and order.” Geoffrey Bromiley liked to paraphrase that as “word, deed, and authority,” and traced all three back to Jesus.

- He ministered in word through teaching and preaching.
- He ministered in deed through healing, cleansing the Temple, going to the cross, etc.
- He ministered in authority through His willingness to supercede the Law, His forgiveness of sins, His casting out of evil spirits, His command of nature, etc.

Compare the three-part commission in the words still spoken over ordinands: “Take authority to preach the Word of God, to administer the holy sacraments, and to perform the duties of an ordained minister in the Church.”

Anglicanism viewed ordination as essential for a full-orbed ministry, and so did Wesley. He would not allow the sacraments to be administered by anyone who was not ordained. Howell Harris quotes Wesley as saying that if he were not ordained, he would look upon it as murder if he offered the ordinances (Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, 208). In less dramatic terms, Wesley scholar Frank Baker affirms, “Wesley never shook off his conviction that for the sake of decency and order, if not for validity and effectiveness, the Lord’s Supper must be administered by an ordained clergyman” (*John Wesley and the Church of England*, 157-8).

That's why he regularly told his Methodists to go to their local Anglican church Sunday mornings for communion, but come to the Methodist chapel that evening (implying, "for everything else you need"!).

So Wesley took ordination seriously. That's not to say that we're bound to follow Wesley to the letter, any more than we're bound to adopt his rejection of tea, his autocratic leadership style, or his fascination with electric shock treatment for various ailments. But unlike those examples, Wesley's view on ordination is grounded in his theology of the church, and generations of spiritual descendants have found value in it.

In part because . . .

Wesley demonstrated flexibility when the situation called for it.

As much as he valued institutional order, Wesley could be remarkably flexible when convinced of the need for it. If souls were at stake, ecclesiastical polity should bend, shouldn't it? The issue seemed clear to him, and he was surprised that his superiors didn't see it the same way. Bottom line: Wesley didn't view church orders as absolutely absolute.

Exhibit A: The Church of England recognized a three-fold order of ministry – bishop, priest, and deacon. The church allowed for the licensing of lay preachers, but in practice the Anglican system had little room for them. Wesley saw their value. He created a vast network of lay preachers, and they became the backbone of the Methodist movement.

Exhibit B: When the refusal of the bishops to ordain ministers for America threatened to kill the work, Wesley rocked the boat again. He started a firestorm (and a fight with his brother) by ordaining on his own authority Thomas Vasey and Richard Whitecoat himself . . . "ordaining" Thomas Coke as superintendent (he was already an elder in the C of E) . . . and instructing Coke to ordain Francis Asbury to that same office.

His actions were unprecedented from a non-Dissenting Anglican, and they produced the anticipated uproar. Wesley's response: "I love the Church of England, but I do not love her so as to take her blemishes as ornaments."

Note, though, that his actions were not a rejection of Anglican polity or the principles behind it. *It was not bad ecclesiology Wesley was circumventing, but bad application of that ecclesiology.*

Fast forward to the rise of Wesleyan Methodism and the Pilgrim Holiness Church as heirs of Wesley's tradition. In the spirit of Wesley, we too did not view church order as absolutely absolute.

We rejected Methodism's episcopacy . . . like Wesley, our objections being prompted by abuse. Bud Bence argues that we were also influenced by America's democratic model, which is undoubtedly true. Add to that the effect of the frontier experience, as posited by Frederick Jackson Turner in general terms and specifically applied to Methodism by James White.

One branch of "us" ordained ministers under the banner of a Holiness Union, not a denomination/church. Seth Rees and Martin Wells Knapp ordained Charles and Lettie Cowman before they left for missionary work in Japan – a dozen years before the Holiness Union became a denomination.

In addition, we ordained women a century before Methodism or Anglicanism did.

In none of those steps did we fail to take ordination seriously. Quite the opposite.

- We set standards for ordination . . . academic standards and service standards.
- Ordination remained a denominational statement which carried the affirmation of the entire church, rather than an individual district or local congregation.
- Our concern that women had been barred from ordination did not lead us to abandon ordination, but rather to open it to all.

Our tradition doesn't bind us . . . it releases us to adapt policies and procedures so long as principles are not compromised.

So what does that freedom to maneuver look like in our present context?

If there is ample precedent for not viewing our tradition as sacrosanct, for being willing to modify it for the sake of the Kingdom . . . if, in fact, that flexibility is itself a part of our tradition . . . then to adapt and adjust to changing contexts within the parameters of our larger principles is very "Wesley-an." We have that kind of elbow room embedded in our DNA.

What shall we say, though, to ecclesiologies which are inconsistent with our own principles but vie for acceptance among us?

One, for example, devalues ordination as a meaningless ritual. When ordinands are told that the laying on of hands won't change a thing . . . that they'll be the same minister tomorrow that they are today . . . that's a germ of truth in that. As Protestants we don't hold ordination to be a sacrament, and we also don't believe that by *opus operatum* there is an automatic change in one's spiritual status when ordination occurs. But at the same time that statement is very wrong. The endorsement of the church IS significant. It's biblical (for close parallels see 1 Timothy 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:6; *et al*) and it's practical. "God called me and the church confirmed it" has kept many of us going in tough times! To devalue ordination is to risk devaluing the role of the church in general . . . one more step toward the churchless Christianity some are calling for.

Another non-Wesleyan view would deny ordination to women. For us, this most likely takes form not in actual refusal to grant them appropriate credentials but rather in failure to entrust them with pastoral responsibilities once ordained.

Still another would be laxity in application of the standards agreed upon for ordination, whether they be academic requirements or service requirements. I'm not speaking of occasional exceptions for cause but of an attitude which considers such requirements unwelcome impediments. "After all, if God called them . . ." the argument typically goes. In reality, our standards fall into a reasonable middle ground between the mandatory seminary degree required by some denominations and the virtual absence of any requirements in others.

And what of adopting a more congregational view of church government with regard to ordination at the hands of a local church? While it's true that such a practice would be inconsistent with our representative form of polity, that would not necessarily rule out accommodating the rising trend of a call to serve a single church with some form of ordination, so long as that ordination remains a denominational and not a local prerogative. (See "flexibility" referenced above.)

In the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, church orders are not more important than the mission of the church . . . but we believe that the mission of the church is facilitated by those orders. Our history proclaims it, and our experience confirms it.

Still, within the parameters of our "mission-driven tradition," we are well-equipped to adapt to changing times with new approaches which don't sacrifice the principles embedded in our theology of the church.

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