

Toward a Wesleyan Theology of Ordination

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What is a Wesleyan theology of ordination and why does it matter? In this brief talk I present only a skeleton of an answer to the former and no more than a suggestive platitude for the latter. But skeletons and platitudes are often more useful, and almost always more flexible, than fully fleshed-out accounts with detailed directives. At least I can hope they will provoke useful discussion today and beyond.

A theology of ordination matters b/c it articulates why ordination matters. It is sad but true that the most convincing reason we give for ordination is the tax break. Now that tax break *is* a reason. And it is a reason bound up with much deeper reasons regarding the legal status of the church in modern nation states. These are no laughing matters. But they are still extrinsic reasons; they are not yet reasons *intrinsic* to ordination as a practice of the church. In other words, they are not yet *theological* reasons. So my suggestive platitude is simply this: a theology of ordination matters because it articulates why ordination matters. If that's something that matters to you and/or those in your care, then perhaps this skeletal sketch will be of use to you.

So now to that sketch. What is a Wesleyan theology of ordination? To structure our reflections, I'd like to attend each word of that phrase: First: What is *ordination*? Second: What are the elements of a *theology* of ordination? And third: What makes a theology of ordination *Wesleyan*?

I.

What is ordination? Let's first approach this question phenomenologically. What would a relatively neutral observer notice in the church's act of ordaining some of its members? What does it appear to us to be? How does the church use the word ordination?

It seems to me that the word “ordination” has both a narrower and a wider sense. The narrower sense refers to the public ritual in which a church ceremonially authorizes its ministers. But the wider sense of ordination refers to the whole unfolding process that begins in the selection and preparation of candidates for ordination, passes through the turning point of a public event of ordination, and culminates in the ongoing status of those who are ordained.¹

What unites these three moments into a single movement is *authority*. Ordination is a process of authorization. Those with authority authorize others to share in their authority. The threefold structure just noted brings this to light: ordination begins in the discernment of one’s fitness for authority, turns on a public event in which that authority is granted, and culminates in the exercise of that authority.

Interestingly, this threefold structure of ordination as authorization can be perceived even within the narrow sense of ordination as a ritual. So, keeping this threefold structure in mind, let’s continue our analysis by paying attention especially to the public act of ordination.

When we observe the ritual of ordination, what do we see? It seems to me that the public act of ordination consists of the *recognition* of a person as fit for authority, the *mediation* of authority to this person, and the *anticipation* of this person’s forthcoming exercise of authority. Recognition, mediation, & anticipation—these three constitute the one act of ordination. ~~Ordination recognizes, mediates, and anticipates authority.~~

Now I confess that this is all very abstract. I believe these abstractions are vital for unfolding my argument; I also hope they’ll be helpful for our ensuing discussion. But let me be more concrete. The public act of ordination consists of at least three distinct yet indissolubly connected aspects: the *presentation* of candidates, the *laying on of hands*, and *prayer*.

¹ This third phase also implicitly includes any accountability that is operative within that ongoing status. In short, ordination presents itself as a threefold phenomenon with a clear and distinct beginning, middle and end: namely, a discernment process, a public ritual, and a consequent status.

First, ordination is an act of *recognition*. In the ritual of ordination, the church recognizes persons who have been selected and prepared as fit for authority. This occurs in what we may call the presentation of candidates. Whether formalized or not, this inevitably occurs. Ordination services are almost never just an open-ended altar call: “Who’d like to get ordained? Hop on up!” For the most part, ordination operates with a clear presentation of those who have, prior to the act, been selected by the church and prepared through some sort of mentoring, education, etc. So, the selection and preparation of ordinands precedes the act of ordination. Furthermore, this prior process is not simply presupposed, but in fact gestured towards in the public presentation of the ordinands. Notice the way we literally set them aside. It’s in the simple things: the way they are marched in, are seated separately, are brought up front in some way. It’s implicit in the act, whether formally ritualized or not. My short hand for this is “recognition.” The presentation of candidates for ordination recognizes an authority already in some sense there. So, in the presentation of candidates, the act of ordination is an act of recognition.

But ordination not only recognizes fitness for authority, but also *mediates* that very authority. This finds its core symbolic expression in the laying on of hands. Those who are authorized to authorize others gather around a candidate, place their hands upon him or her, and in doing so not only recognize an authority that is already there but also mediate an authority that is being given in that moment. However one thinks this through theologically, at least on the surface the act of ordination presents itself as a conferring of some sort of authority that was in some sense not yet there. The laying on of hands strikingly symbolizes this mediation of authority *from* those already authorized *to* one being authorized in that very moment. So, in the laying on of hands, the act of ordination is an act of mediation.

Lastly, ordination is an *anticipation* of the fruitful exercise of the authority being given in that moment. This comes to concrete expression in the words of prayer almost invariably spoken in a public event of ordination, often coinciding with the laying on of hands. In a certain sense, the laying of hands in itself authorizes the candidate. In a sense, the candidate is now ordained. And yet this laying on of hands is accompanied by a prayer. Why? Well, prayer, at least petitionary prayer (which is the sort spoken in the act of ordination), is directed toward the future.² The prayer on behalf of the ordinand recognizes that the faithful and fruitful exercise of the authority being given in that moment is still yet to come. And so the church publicly anticipates this coming faithfulness and fruitfulness by begging God to bring it about. This prayer places hope in God's own confirmation of the church's act of authorization. Therefore, it implicitly recognizes that the church's act of authorizing by the laying on of hands does not, in and of itself without the further act of God, guarantee a faithful and fruitful exercise of the authority being given. It points forward with humble hope to a coming act of God in and through the ordinand. So, in the prayer, the act of ordination is an act of anticipation.

In sum, if we pay close attention to the ritual of ordination, we can see a threefold grammar of the act of ordination. To ordain is to recognize, to mediate, and to anticipate. Ordination is the recognition of a fitness for authority, thus pointing back to a process of selection and preparation. Ordination is also the mediation of that authority in and with the laying on of hands. And ordination is the prayerful anticipation of the divine confirmation and human execution of authority there granted, thus pointing forward to an ongoing state of being authorized. In this threefold act, ordination authorizes.

II.

² Petitionary prayer indispensably entails futurity.

What is a theology of ordination? Having analyzed the phenomenon of ordination, we now seek to pierce beneath mere appearances to discern the divine dimension of this human practice. Because it is a human practice, it was fitting to attend to it as a phenomenon. And yet by faith we recognize that this human practice is divinely ordered. Theology attends to this divine dimension.³

This is neither the time nor the place for a fully fleshed-out theology of ordination.⁴ Instead, I'd like us to simply ask: What are the constituent elements of a theology of ordination? What are the basic moves a theology of ordination must make? In other words, what are its central questions? Although this will give us only a skeleton, I suspect that such a skeleton will be just as, if not more, useful than a fully fleshed-out account. For it will, among other things, be portable enough to recall and flexible enough to apply in various circumstances.⁵

Thankfully, the basic structure of a theology of ordination is supplied by our phenomenological analysis above. The practice of ordination consists in the church's recognition, mediation, and anticipation of ministerial authority.⁶ If the church's faith is to be believed, then the church's act of ordination is preceded, accompanied, and surpassed by the

³ Theology is faith seeking understanding. So, if by faith we take this phenomenon to play a special role in God's economy, then theology simply seeks to understand what this faith commitment entails. That is what theology does. But, of course, theology is about God, while ordination is a human act. So doing a theology of ordination may seem strange at first. Yet it is more precise to say that theology is about God *and* all things in terms of their relationship to God. This is, by the way, why the medieval scholastics put forth the scandalous proposition that theology is the queen of the sciences. At its best, this proposition did not entail that theology directs or controls the enquiry of other sciences; but rather, that the scope of its subject matter is all-inclusive such that everything that other sciences talk about, theology also may talk about, but solely in terms of how that thing relates to God as its source, center, and end. So, theology in its fullest sense is about God and all things in terms of their relationship to God. And theology attends to this its subject matter by way of faith seeking understanding. So, in the case of ordination, this thoroughly human act of ordination, this phenomenon as process, event, and state, this act of recognition, mediation, and anticipation; this human practice is one among all things which, when understood in its relationship to God, is an appropriate subject matter of theological study.

⁴ Such a fully fleshed-out account would need to attend to the practice of ordination in its total relevant context in relationship to divine and human agency. To do so would require space and time not only for a preponderance of theses, but also for arguments in support of those theses.

⁵ Furthermore, it will avoid the distraction of putting forth my own idiosyncratic theology of ordination, which we need not waste time debating today

⁶ This surface grammar is a window into the deep grammar, the depth dimension, the divine determination of the human practice of ordination.

divine act of ordination. This divine act of ordination is an act of divine *grace*. In the fullness of his grace, God gives. What does God give in ordination? God gives authority. God authorizes humans to serve as God's ministers. The divine act of ordination is a divine act of grace that consists in the giving of divine authority to a human being so that this human being is authorized to play a special role in God's economy.⁷

Thus it is fitting that recurring question in the theology of ordination concerns the relationship between divine and human agency, i.e., the *relationship* between God's divine act of authorizing individuals for ministry and the church's human act of authorizing individual humans for ministry. The most extreme mistakes render either divine or human agency superfluous. But even if we avoid such extremes, as most Christian theologies do, more subtle mistakes are crouching at the door. For different traditions tend to reduce divine action to just one of three aspects of ordination outlined above.⁸ But just as the church's act of ordination follows a threefold pattern, so also does the divine act of ordination.⁹ So we can utilize this structure to remind ourselves of the fullness of God's grace: in ordination the church recognizes, mediates, and anticipates God's grace.

First, in ordination the church *recognizes* God's grace. When the church recognizes an ordinand's fitness for ordination, we do not merely select from among our own those we surmise would be good at ministry, nor merely respond to those among us who want to do ministry, nor merely oversee the preparation of ordinands for ministry as a human occupation. No. The church, of course, does do all of these things, and there's no shame in saying so, for ordination is

⁷ The threefold structure discerned above implicitly indicates this divine dimension. For in the human practice of ordination, the church recognizes a preceding act of divine giving, mediates a present act of divine giving, and anticipates a forthcoming act of divine giving.

⁸ And if the divine act of ordination is reduced to only one of its aspects, or perhaps split into just two of its three aspects, then inevitably one-sided accounts of the relationship between divine and human agency kick in.

⁹ More precisely: by faith the church confesses that its very threefold act *refers to* and *participates in* God's own threefold act.

a human practice. But that's certainly not all that we're doing. By faith the church confesses that in its act of ordination it is first and foremost recognizing a preceding act of divine ordination.¹⁰ In the standard terminology of the Western churches, we refer to this preceding act as a divine calling.¹¹ As it says in our Wesleyan documents, there are four things that ecclesial bodies are to discern in an ordinand: gifts, graces, calling, and fruit. However, anyone who has gone through an ordination process (as an ordinand or as an ordainer) can attest that divine calling is the *sine qua non* of the church's act of recognition. We look for gifting; we look for graces; we look for fruit—as we should. But even if all of those seem to be there, yet we do not discern a calling, ordination gets delayed. I've seen it over and over again. This prioritization of divine calling is likely a function of our pietistic and revivalist roots. Now, I for one find that prioritization frustrating. But I resist it only in practice, not in principle. Or should I say: only formally, not materially. For, we tend to have a far too restrictive and prescriptive notion of the *form* that a testimony to divine calling must take. We expect a measure of supernatural clarity and certainty that I think is unfair, especially to our younger ordinands. I think we should have a much more open mind about what a call story may look like and what many forms it can take. But with that said, I don't think there is a material mistake here. For, the church as a human agent does not simply recognize *human* fitness for authority in its ordinands. No. We confess by faith that we are first and foremost recognizing a *divine* authorization of a person for ministry. In the standard language of our churches, we recognize a prior divine calling. Ordination authorizes first because it recognizes—it recognizes a divine summons and empowerment for ordination, an authorization to become authorized in the church's ministry.

¹⁰ In fact, ordination as a human practice itself falls into contradiction insofar as it is reduced to its human agency. For, our very actions and words make explicit and implicit reference to a preceding divine act of grace.

¹¹ Now, I have serious and, I believe, damning objections to this particular use of the language of "calling," which I'd be happy to get into at another time—perhaps even later today. But, since it is the standard language and appears in our own ecclesial documents, I'll stick with it for now.

(2) Second, in ordination the church *mediates* God's grace.¹² In the laying on of hands, the church through its ministers symbolically *hands on* the very authority present in them to the ordinand. This is, by the way, why traditionally only ordained persons are invited to participate in the laying of hands. Inviting friends and family to join is a sentimental adventure in missing the point. The church hands on authority, and in that moment expands the circle of its authorized persons. But the church does not act alone. No. The church's own act explicitly refers to the work of the divine Spirit in, with, and under the laying on of hands, such that we are not only recognizing a prior divine authorization, but in fact, mediating a new, fresh, divine act of authorization.

This is why in many traditions, ordination is regarded as a sacrament, for—to use the standard definition—sacraments confer what they signify. Not all signs performed by the church also confer (hand over, give, mediate) the divine grace that they signify and testify to. But ordination, even in traditions that do not officially refer to it as a sacrament, often follows this very logic. For we believe by faith that God is not merely present in the initial calling and then steps away—a kind of vocational deism. No. God continues to be involved and is involved centrally and dominantly in this punctiliar moment in the laying on of hands. In First Timothy 4v14, Paul speak of the gift given in the laying on of hands by the elders. Now our tradition is intertwined with movements that have overreacted to this more sacramental understanding of ordination, so it is easy for us to forget. However, our original historical setting at the time of the Wesleys presupposed and explicitly affirmed this understanding. But we should be careful not to

¹² Divine agency does not come to a close but has only just begun in God's initial authorization. I am inclined to suggest that most of the mistakes made in our own tradition come from a reduction of divine action in ordination to this preceding act. For, following the church's recognition of this prior divine act, the church, in the laying of hands, mediates the authority for which the ordinand was initially authorized by God and recognized by the church

overcorrect our pietist reduction of divine ordination to one's prior calling by falling into a sacramentalist reduction of divine ordination to church ritual.¹³ Both are essential.

Third, in ordination the church *anticipates* God's grace. The church does not only recognize a prior divine gift and mediate the present divine giving but also anticipates a forthcoming act of divine gifting. This third aspect of divine ordination is signified by the word of prayer spoken over the ordinand. If the divine act were relegated totally to the past and/or the present, then the presentation of the candidate and the laying on of hands would be sufficient. And yet, the laying on of hands is always accompanied by a word of prayer—a prayer that typically invokes the Spirit of God, begging God to act yet again, to come afresh upon the ordinand, thereby fully authorizing them for ministry. Again, it would be a mistake to reduce ordination to this anticipatory aspect. In doing so the church would be shirking its responsibility to properly recognize and mediate the divine gift of ordination. We may tentatively refer to this as a charismatic reduction of divine ordination to divine gifting. Here the mistake would be to reduce God's act to the surprising and spontaneous, to the marvelous and miraculous, without respect for the discernment of divine calling and the due administration of divine office. But we ought not so fear this reductionism that we forget that the giving of gifts for ministry does not end with ordination, but in a crucial sense has only just begun. Ordination is a petition, and so a resolute openness to the forthcoming guidance and gifting and glory of God.

In sum, a theology of ordination asks after the deeper meaning of the human act of ordination in terms of its relation to God. It therefore consists of the threefold question: How

¹³ But the reaction is understandable, for just as one can make the mistake of reducing the divine act of ordination to the initial act of calling, one can also reduce the act of divine ordination to this middle aspect of the present accompanying and concomitant act of self-giving in the Holy Spirit. In other words, just as there is a pietist reduction of divine ordination to one's prior calling, so also there is a sacramentalist reduction of divine ordination to church ritual. Any attempt to correct for the former reductionism must be wary of overcompensating by falling into the latter.

does God's own act of ordination precede, accompany, and surpass our human act of ordaining? Any theology of ordination worthy of the name ought to attend to each of these three aspects, being especially wary of reducing divine agency to just one of them.

III.

What makes a theology of ordination Wesleyan? Having analyzed ordination in general, both as human phenomenon and as a theological reality, let us turn to ask what particular perspective Wesleyans have to offer. What is the Wesleyan way of exploring the questions raised above? Here we must continue to be skeletal, not only out of respect for time but also out of respect for the diversity of Wesleyan theologies of ordination. The fact is that the Wesleyan tradition has not put forth a discernably singular theology of ordination. Our answers to these fundamental theological questions tend to be derivative and eclectic. I do not intend these terms as an insult, for most theologies are mostly derivative and eclectic! It may be unfortunate, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, for every Christian tradition has those topics for which they tend to rely on received traditions more than their distinctive articulations. For Wesleyans, ordination is one of those topics. And since the received traditions vary widely on these issues, so do we.

Nevertheless, Wesleyans do have a distinct *way* of theologizing about ordination: namely, we tend to emphasize the complex relationship between ordination and salvation. The Wesleyan tradition is distinctively a soteriologically-focused tradition. So, even though our positions on the core questions in a theology of ordination are derivative and eclectic, we still have a distinctive and determinate way of exploring these issues. Three stand out to me, each of which correspond roughly to the three aspects of ordination analyzed above.

First, ordination as recognition raises the question of the logical and even chronological place of ordination in the *via salutis*. Where does ordination fit in the unfolding of one's salvation? When does ordination occur? Does ordination presuppose true conversion and regeneration, or may it emerge in and with it? Could ordination even somehow precede regeneration, emerging alongside an awakening to sin? Or is it by definition subsequent upon regeneration? Does it even require significant progress in sanctification as a prerequisite? Although Wesleyans tend to take for granted that its ministers will be regenerate and even mature members of the community, this assumption is not always explicitly warranted, and in fact, it stands in tension with our consistent sense that ordination is not, in fact, a point on the plotline of the *via salutis*. For we, like most Christian traditions, affirm the idea of ordination being granted only to some. Whereas the *via salutis* applies to all Christians, ordination does not. Therefore the event of ordination by its very nature cannot be plotted on the *via salutis* as such. And so, we run into recurring questions about how far along a Christian must be in order to be ordained.

Again, I think Wesleyans have offered a diversity of answers on this question, and I imagine that in this room we likely have a diversity of opinion on this question, a diversity that I have no interest in foreclosing any time soon, and certainly not today. But it seems to me that it is, in fact, distinctively Wesleyan to think long and hard about this question. We are not a tradition that simply checks to make sure that our ordinands are members in good standing. Such a purely empirical judgment is odious to us precisely as Wesleyans. As Wesleyans we are deeply inclined to wonder about the unfolding progress of the souls of all Christians. We are deeply concerned about a real and not merely nominal Christianity. And so this concern fittingly applies to the church's work of recognizing whom God has authorized for ministry. We ought to be

careful to not set too high of a bar for ordination—that is our natural temptation. But we ought not overcorrect by having no bar at all. Expecting our pastors to already be perfect is pernicious. But expecting our pastors to be pursuing perfection is prudent. “Not that I have already attained, but I strive on toward the goal!”

Second, in what sense is the mediating act of ordination a means of grace? Though not all or even many Wesleyans explicitly regard ordination as a sacrament, our expansive and inclusive notion of a means of grace exerts an influence on our thinking about the act of laying on of hands. In the laying on of hands, the church mediates a present divine act of ordination. Now in Wesleyan sacramentology in general and Wesleyan theology of ministry in particular, there is considerable ambiguity and even controversy regarding the precise relationship between divine and human agency in ritualized ecclesial actions. It seems to me that this ambiguity need not be settled for us to articulate a distinctive Wesleyan account. In fact, it may be a part of the Wesleyan way that it finds this question relevant but not decisive. Rather, it seems to me that our much looser language of the means of grace—which is a more inclusive canon of sacramental (or even sacrament-ish) practices—sets the terms for our central concerns surrounding ordination. We would be wise to consider how and in what sense ordination serves as a means of grace for all those who participate.

Perhaps you may indulge a bit of personal testimony on this front. For me at least, receiving the laying on of hands was a sort of converting ordinance for me. Not converting in the sense of the first time—I was already converted—but in the sense of the ongoing conversion that is the Christian life. I had struggled deeply with my place in the church and in the ministry, especially as it related to my intellectual interests and emerging vocation to teach. For me, the laying on of hands brought with it that recognition and affirmation by the church that was so

important to me and something I had sought for so long. It granted me a clear sense that the Spirit was being placed upon me, not only as an inner teacher, but as one who is authorizing me as a life-long student and teacher of divine things. Coming forward and kneeling at that altar, receiving the Spirit afresh through the laying on of the hands of the ministers in my district, including the laying of the hand upon my head by our general superintendent—that for me may have been the most important altar call of my life, one to which I return again and again, and most of all when I get to participate as one of those hands being laid on another. Like the reaffirmation of vows that implicitly occurs whenever I attend a wedding with my wife or the reaffirmation of my baptism whenever I witness another being baptized, every ordination service continues to be a means of grace for me, confirming and deepening and summoning me in my life of service. Perhaps this experience is unique to me, but I have good reason to believe that I am not alone in this. Perhaps more explicit attention and consideration of ordination as a means of grace would enrich the experience, or at the very least set our standards a little higher than merely getting it over with at district conference so that we can get on to other matters of business. For ordination is not mere business; it is a means of grace.

Third and finally, the anticipatory aspect of ordination links it with the Wesleyan distinctive doctrine of entire sanctification. Ordination by its very nature is ordered to its future. What is that future? Well, ordination authorizes by anticipating an ongoing life of service—no mere status, but an ongoing journey into communion with God. This is especially crucial when navigating the persistent question of what if any practices are reserved for the ordained alone. From its inception the Wesleyan tradition has been of two minds on this matter. On the one hand, we have carried on for the most part the tradition of reserving eucharistic presidency as the exclusive right and responsibility of ordained ministers. On the other hand, our entire movement

is animated by democratized proclamation, from Wesley's lay preachers to holy rolling testifiers. Ironically, early Methodist circuit riders embody both sides of this tension! Again, I am not interested in resolving this tension today. Rather, I want to call attention to *fact* of this unresolved tension and ponder whether it makes a certain sort of sense given our soteriological convictions.¹⁴

What I want to suggest is that **entire sanctification just is the fulfillment of ordination;** that ordination, like justification, is ordered toward perfect love. I want to suggest that ordination is not primarily about certain people getting to do certain things that only those certain people get to do. Perhaps the function of ordination, in keeping with our deepest Wesleyan wisdom, is just another particular act provided by God to bring us closer to him. As an act of anticipation, ordination is a human act by which we wait for God to act. And so its primary significance lies not in its authorization to do this or that but in its authorization to pursue God entirely, to surrender one's whole life to God's service. *Perhaps ordination is less about performing and more about perfecting.* If so, then ordination matters even if a strong distinction between clergy and laity does not. Ordination may very well be a means of grace to which *some* are invited on their way toward the perfection to which *all* are called. To be perfected in love is to be released *from* the excessive orientation to one's self-improvement and hence released *for* life-giving service to the world. This is the precisely the sort of reorientation that ordination anticipates. The more one matures into this perfect love, the more one's ordination status becomes a distinction without a difference. And if along the way the line between the ordained and the non-ordained gets a little fuzzy, that needn't worry us overmuch. Ordination will still matter: for some of us have discerned that we can't do what God has authorized us to do without the church

¹⁴ ~~Bear with me, because this is a much more exploratory claim.~~

recognizing, mediating and anticipating that authority. But in the end, actually *exercising* that authority matters way more than any letters before our name. And the exercise of divine authority rests ultimately on participating in divine love. In the end, the only authority any of us have is the love of God.

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