

**Challenge and Promise:
Apostolicity and the Methodist Vocation to ‘Serve the Present Age’**

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Among the more infamous pieces in the corpus of Charles Wesley’s verse is the “Epigram” he penned in response to his brother’s decision to preside at ministerial ordinations in 1784. In particular, when John Wesley “set apart” Thomas Coke as superintendent for Methodists in America, Charles articulated a sharp response:

So easily are Bishops made
By man’s, or woman’s whim?
W_____ his hands on C_____ hath laid,
but who laid hands on Him?

Hands on himself he laid, and took
An Apostolic Chair:
And then ordain’d his Creature C_____
His Heir and Successor.¹

Charles’ thinly-veiled invective serves to illustrate the ecclesiological ambiguity of the Methodist movement as it developed gradually and perhaps hesitantly into a church. A central concern of Charles’ in the Epigram is apostolicity, one of the *nota ecclesiae* in the Creed of Nicea-Constantinople. As with many ecclesiological categories, the notion of apostolicity has proven to be rather complex in the Methodist tradition. In this, of course, Methodists are not alone. The concept of “apostolicity” was forged in a context of theological controversy.² Long after those particular controversies have dissipated, and with the

¹ Charles Wesley, *Representative Verse*, edited by Frank Baker (New York: Abingdon, 1963), p. 368.

² Jaroslav Pelikan demonstrates how, in various ways, the Marcionite, Gnostic, and Montanist controversies all engaged the question of apostolic continuity. In the process of responding to these movements, the church catholic forged its main criteria for apostolic continuity. See Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 108-120. It is important to note, however, that confession of the church as “apostolic” does not appear in baptismal creeds before the 4th century. See Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1988), p. 152.

confession of the church's apostolicity secure in almost every Christian tradition (even many 'non-creedal' ones), the precise nature of apostolicity remains deeply contested. Indeed, the meaning of apostolicity has proven to be one of the more sensitive arenas of ecumenical discussion.

In what follows, I aim to explore theologically the notion of apostolicity and its bearing upon Methodist ecclesiology. While apostolicity is a rich and variegated concept, I would suggest that it has been employed to convey three primary ideas: *continuity* with the historical and visible church, the *integrity* of the church's life and witness, and the *calling* of the church to proclaim the gospel in word and deed. Various ecclesial traditions have tended to emphasize one or more of these dimensions with particular force, especially in polemical contexts. As Albert Outler once wrote, "the vast majority of Christians confess 'one holy catholic and apostolic church'—and then fall into profound disagreement as to what this really means."³ In the case of Methodism, the shifts in emphasis help to illuminate certain features of Methodist ecclesiology at various times. After tracing some of these shifts, we will be in a position to explore both the challenge and the promise of embracing a robust notion of apostolicity in present-day Methodism. As is often the case due to their history and ecclesial location, Methodist communions are in a unique position to model a mediating vision of apostolicity. Such a vision will not force a choice among continuity, integrity, and evangelistic calling, but rather will hold these dimensions together in a creative tension.

³ Albert C. Outler, *That the World May Believe: A Study of Christian Unity and What It Means for Methodists* (New York: Joint Commission on Education and Cultivation, Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1966), p. 89.

Historical Reflections on the Development of “Apostolicity”

The category of apostolicity was invoked in the post-New Testament period to express the ongoing identity of the community of faith (and/or particular materials such as biblical texts) with the church of the apostles. This was particularly important for the church catholic in securing claims to authenticity in the face of competing visions of the faith. It is striking, for example, that Irenaeus appealed both to the apostolic *message* (namely, the rule of faith) and to the apostolic *messengers* (the succession of bishops tracing back to the apostles) to refute the claims of Gnosticism.⁴ Irenaeus’ move here reflects the two aspects of apostolicity that Francis Sullivan detects in the post-New Testament sources: “apostolicity of faith” and “apostolicity of ministry.” Indeed, the interplay between authentic message and faithful messenger became central to the idea of apostolicity that emerged:

We can also see how apostolicity of faith and apostolicity of ministry were interrelated. Apostolicity of faith, of course, was a quality of the whole church, and all the faithful had their part in preserving and handing on the faith they had received. But the transmission of the apostolic deposit was especially the responsibility of those who had the official ministry of teaching in the churches. Hence, their credentials as successors to the apostles in their ministry provided an assurance of fidelity to the apostolic teaching which unofficial teachers would not have had.⁵

Sullivan makes it clear that the apostolicity of faith was not limited to or identified uncritically with the claim of apostolic succession rooted in the historic episcopate. Rather, the latter was a sign of the former. A similar point is made from the perspective of Eastern Orthodoxy by John Meyendorff: “Apostolic ‘succession’ has no reality outside of apostolic

⁴ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* III.3.1-4, I.10.1. See the illuminating discussion of Irenaeus and apostolicity in Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, pp. 108-120. On Irenaeus and the rule of faith, see Joseph T. Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), particularly Chapter 4.

⁵ Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, p. 181.

‘tradition,’ and the guardian of apostolic tradition is the whole Church, although the bishops within the Church are its most responsible witnesses.”⁶

At this point, a crucial development should be noted—one that would later become the focal point of dialogue and debate between ecclesial traditions. As the church matured and faced various kinds of controversies, there was an increasing recognition that the very validity of ministerial orders (and thus the valid celebration of the Eucharist) depended necessarily on the historic episcopate in apostolic succession. One can detect an increasing technicality in this claim over the course of the first few centuries of the church’s life. An important stage in this development is attested by Hippolytus in *The Apostolic Tradition*, specifically in the description of the ordination of bishops. Here we see the central role of the laying on of hands by all of the bishops present.⁷ Sullivan notes the significance of this witness:

From the fact that it was only the bishops present who laid hands on the candidate, and that the solemn prayer was pronounced only by a bishop “at the request of all,” we can conclude that it was understood by the second-century church that it was only those who already belonged to the Episcopal order who could aggregate others to it, and so share their collegial mandate with them. It was only in this way that the new bishop’s authority would be derived from the authority which Jesus had given to his apostles.⁸

The consolidation of this authority in the episcopate, particularly in presiding over the Eucharist as a sacrament of unity, is particularly evident in Cyprian of Carthage in the third century.⁹ For Cyprian, bishops necessarily served as arbiters of reinstatement to ecclesial communion after the Decian persecution. It is not too much to say that Cyprian grounded

⁶ John Meyendorff, *Catholicity and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1983), p. 59.

⁷ Hippolytus, *The Apostolic Tradition*, II.3-5.

⁸ Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, 178.

⁹ For a helpful summary of these developments in the second and third centuries, see Bernard P. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology Through the Centuries* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2004), pp. 120-130.

the unity and holiness of the church in the episcopacy.¹⁰ By now we can detect a very important shift: the historic episcopate, which was initially a sign of the apostolicity of the whole church, had become the guarantor of authentic faith for the church.¹¹ Ordinations or sacraments practiced outside the communion represented by the episcopal college were deemed invalid.¹² Moreover, the ecclesial life of any community whose minister was not episcopally ordained could lay no claim to apostolicity, regardless of what was taught, proclaimed, or practiced in such a community.

It is precisely this last set of claims that would be challenged with a vengeance in the polemical climate of the 16th century. While the early church had insisted that the continuity of *both* message and messenger were crucial to the church's apostolicity, the Reformation brought increasing pressure to choose between them. The Reformers argued that the historical succession of the episcopate had not proven sufficient to preserve the core of apostolic doctrine; in fact, they deemed the pure gospel to have been obscured in layers of tradition. While not all of the Reformers rejected the episcopal office or the importance of visible continuity—Martin Luther attempted unsuccessfully to have his ministers ordained by the German bishops¹³—they collectively shifted the focus of apostolicity from messenger

¹⁰ Prusak suggests that such a move was necessary precisely because so many Christians had failed to give witness to their faith during the persecution. See *The Church Unfinished*, p. 126.

¹¹ The way in which this development is read, of course, will depend upon the vision of apostolicity one takes to the discussion. Some will see this as a necessary and fortuitous provision of the Holy Spirit for the church, while others will read this as a precarious narrowing of apostolicity that would ultimately undermine the essence of apostolic doctrine.

¹² The Donatist Controversy serves as another fascinating case here, in two respects. First, *both* sides in that debate assumed that valid ordination depended upon the presence of bishops in apostolic succession (thus demonstrating the development we have been exploring). Second, Augustine's contention that the validity of ordination or sacraments did not depend on the morality of the one presiding would later enable the further "institutionalization" of sacramental authority. While Augustine's emphasis was clearly on *God's* action in the sacraments, the increasingly juridical character of ministerial authority in the West can be linked in part to this move.

¹³ For illuminating accounts of Luther's understanding of apostolicity in an "emergency" situation, see The Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Apostolicity of the Church: Study Document of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2006), pp. 50-71, 88-134; and John J. Burkhard, O.F.M. Conv., *Apostolicity*

to message. In particular, the pure gospel message came to be seen by Protestants as “the decisive criterion of continuity in practice with the apostolic church.”¹⁴ Furthermore, the essential measure of fidelity to the gospel was identified as the church’s canon of Scripture rather than the teaching of bishops in apostolic succession.¹⁵ What emerged from this period (and remains to a great extent today) was a polarization between two primary views of apostolicity, which Sullivan calls a “‘protestant’ view” and a “‘catholic’ view.”¹⁶ The former understands the New Testament as the essential criterion of both apostolicity of faith and pattern of ministry (though ecclesial communities holding this view differ on what actually constitutes that pattern). The latter affirms the full apostolic tradition—including but not limited to Scripture—as normative, while insisting “that apostolicity of ministry requires ordination by bishops who share the apostolic mandate through their own membership in the episcopal college.”¹⁷

Over the course of the last century, substantial ecumenical dialogue has made it clear that this fundamental difference in views continues to pose a significant challenge to ecclesial unity. Still, the very difficulty of the issue has resulted in a great deal of focused attention, resulting in some notable progress. The meaning of the confession of the church as apostolic has been the subject of numerous ecumenical discussions, at both the bilateral and multilateral levels.¹⁸ I would point to three significant positive signs that have arisen from

Then and Now: An Ecumenical Church in a Postmodern World (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2004), pp. 201-211.

¹⁴ *The Apostolicity of the Church*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁵ From the vantage point of the 21st century, it appears somewhat odd to pit two crucial elements of the church’s canonical heritage—sacred text and ecclesial interpreter—against each other. There were, of course, a myriad of historical reasons why each party felt it necessary to pursue its respective course. One detects that a positive achievement of ecumenical efforts is widespread agreement on the importance of both text and interpreter in maintaining fidelity to the gospel.

¹⁶ Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, p. 186.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ Helpful overviews of these dialogues can be found in Burkhard, *Apostolicity Then and Now*, Chapter 7; and Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, Chapter 9.

these discussions. The first is an increasingly comprehensive understanding of the church's apostolicity, despite ongoing disagreements on some crucial particulars. An especially rich account of "apostolic tradition" was crafted in the monumental *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (*BEM*) of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. This account is worth citing at length:

In the Creed, the Church confesses itself to be apostolic. The Church lives in continuity with the apostles and their proclamation. The same Lord who sent the apostles continues to be present in the Church. The Spirit keeps the Church in the apostolic tradition until the fulfillment of history in the Kingdom of God. Apostolic tradition in the Church means continuity in the permanent characteristics of the Church of the apostles: witness to the apostolic faith, proclamation and fresh interpretation of the Gospel, celebration of baptism and the eucharist, the transmission of ministerial responsibilities, communion in prayer, love, joy, and suffering, service to the sick and the needy, unity among the local churches and sharing the gifts which the Lord has given to each.¹⁹

Clearly, this document presses toward a recovery of the connection between message and messenger that was compromised in ecclesial division. Since Faith and Order is represented by churches from across the spectrum on the nature of apostolicity, the comprehensive character of the statement in *BEM* is quite promising.

A second and related positive trend is a renewed affirmation of apostolicity as a mark of the *whole* church, not just the ordained ministry. One of the most important ecumenical documents in this respect is the Porvoo Common Statement, which emerged from dialogues between British and Irish Anglican Churches and Nordic and Baltic Lutheran Churches in the 1990's. Porvoo affirms that "the primary manifestation of apostolic succession to be found in the apostolic tradition of the Church as a whole," though the ordained ministry (and particularly the episcopacy) has a crucial role in nourishing the apostolic church.²⁰ Both

¹⁹ *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), "Ministry," IV.A.34.

²⁰ *Porvoo Common Statement*, 4.A.40-B.45.

BEM and the Porvoo Common Statement recognize episcopal succession as a *sign*, but not a *guarantee* of the church's apostolicity. Ola Tjørhom suggests that Porvoo offers a vision of reconciliation that affirms the distinctive concerns of various ecclesial communions: "What Porvoo actually does is to invite the churches to share their different signs of apostolicity with each other within the framework of a living communion...all the concerned churches have vital gifts to bring in this connection."²¹ By attending to the contribution that each community can make to a fuller embrace of apostolicity, the statement allows for mutual enrichment as well as the preservation of the emphases that have been especially valued by those communities.

The fresh recognition of apostolicity as a *vocation* is a third noteworthy trend in ecumenical discussion. As we have seen, disagreement between those espousing a "protestant view" and a "catholic' view" of apostolicity has often focused on the appropriate criteria for maintaining the apostolic faith and ministry. Yet the gospel is not only to be *maintained*, it is also to be *proclaimed*. As Geoffrey Wainwright has written, "the Church will not consider its apostolic task complete as long as there are those to whom the gospel must be preached."²² Indeed, the etymological roots of "apostolicity" remind us that an apostle is one "sent out." Several recent ecumenical efforts have called attention to the reality that apostolicity concerns more than the preservation of the faith; it also involves living out the fullness of the church's calling. In its section on "Apostolic Faith," the Faith and Order document *The Nature and Mission of the Church* affirms: "The Church is called upon

²¹ Ola Tjørhom, "The Church and its Apostolicity: The Porvoo Common Statement as a Challenge to Lutheran Ecclesiology and the Nordic Lutheran Churches," *Ecumenical Review* 52, no. 2 (April 2000): 200.

²² Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 135-136.

to proclaim the same faith in each generation, in each and every place.”²³ Or, as the Porvoo Common Statement suggests:

The Church today is charged, as were the apostles, to proclaim the gospel to all nations, because the good news about Jesus Christ is the disclosure of God's eternal plan for the reconciliation of all things in his Son. The Church is called to faithfulness to the normative apostolic witness to the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of its Lord. The Church receives its mission and the power to fulfil this mission as a gift of the risen Christ. The Church is thus apostolic as a whole. `Apostolicity means that the Church is sent by Jesus to be for the world, to participate in his mission and therefore in the mission of the One who sent Jesus, to participate in the mission of the Father and the Son through the dynamic of the Holy Spirit'.²⁴

In light of these developments, then, we can identify *continuity*, *integrity*, and *calling* as essential to any comprehensive vision of apostolicity. Communion is still divided on the question of the necessity of apostolic succession through the historic episcopate. Yet there is a concern on both sides of that divide to maintain a sense of continuity with the faith and ministry of the apostles. Moreover, there is a shared interest by all Christians in attending carefully to the content of what is taught and preached. While disagreements remain on the criteria for maintaining doctrinal integrity, it can be agreed that apostolicity is concerned with proclaiming the same gospel as the apostles. Finally, apostolicity is a feature of both the nature and the mission of the church. The church has been “sent out” by its Lord; it has a vocation to proclaim and live out its faith in the concreteness of history. Failure to do so is surely a failure to realize the apostolicity that the church confesses.

Apostolicity and Transitions in Methodism

In order to locate Methodism within the sketch we have drawn in the foregoing discussion, a few initial comments are in order. First, it is clear that Methodists have fairly

²³ *The Nature and Mission of the Church: A Stage on the Way to a Common Statement*, Faith and Order Paper No. 198, III.A.69.

²⁴ *Porvoo Common Statement*, 4.A.37.

consistently rejected the notion that apostolic succession in the historic episcopate is *necessary* for ecclesiality. Yet this is not to suggest that continuity has not been important to Methodists in understanding the nature of apostolicity. In fact, all three elements noted above—continuity, integrity, and calling—have shaped the vision of apostolicity in Wesleyan ecclesial communities. Moreover, exploring the weight of emphasis given to particular elements at particular times yields insight into important transitions in Methodist ecclesiology. It is often noted that Methodism does not have a reputation for sustained, formal ecclesiological self-reflection.²⁵ Yet those occasions where Methodist theologians and church leaders have offered such reflections prove to be illuminating.

It has been well documented that John Wesley's own ecclesiological vision was marked by numerous tensions and transitions. Frank Baker's classic study *John Wesley and the Church of England* traces these patterns in detail, following Wesley as he negotiated between his commitment to Anglican order and the practical needs of his ministry.²⁶ As was his style, Wesley gradually shifted his emphasis from the former to the latter on the question of apostolicity while never fully leaving his Anglican commitments behind. While the early Wesley (not surprisingly) defended the necessity of episcopal ordination, the rigidity of this position began to give way in the 1740's. By the early 1750's, Wesley had become convinced that bishops and presbyters were essentially the same order, though he still recognized a functional distinction between them.²⁷ In 1760, Wesley offered a clear rejection of uninterrupted episcopal succession in his response to Richard Challoner's *Caveat Against the Methodists*: "I deny that the Romish bishops came down by *uninterrupted* succession from the

²⁵ Outler made this argument forcefully in his 1962 Oxford Institute presentation "Do Methodists Have a Doctrine of the Church?" The published version of this paper is available in Dow Kirkpatrick, ed., *The Doctrine of the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon; London: Epworth, 1964), pp. 11-28; and Thomas C. Oden and Leicester R. Longden, eds., *The Wesleyan Theological Heritage: Essays of Albert C. Outler* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), pp. 211-226.

²⁶ Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth, 1970).

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 146-150.

apostles. I never could see it proved, and I am persuaded I never shall.”²⁸ Yet, in that same work, Wesley also affirmed a version of apostolic succession. He argued that Protestant pastors had converted sinners to God, requiring God’s appointment and assistance, and that Protestant teachers served as “the proper successors of those who have delivered down, through all generations, the faith once delivered to the saints.”²⁹ This work, which offers Wesley’s mature position on apostolicity, deftly blends his concerns for historical continuity (despite his historical doubts about the episcopacy), doctrinal integrity, and the ministerial vocation.

After Wesley’s death, Methodists on either side of the Atlantic only occasionally reflected on the nature of apostolicity. When they did so, they generally accepted and defended Wesley’s mature vision. Yet the manner and purpose of these reflections often revealed a great deal about how the church itself was understood. This becomes clear, for example, in the ecclesiological reflections of the first Methodist bishops in North America. Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke affirmed Wesley’s position on apostolic continuity, yet the driving interest—particularly for Asbury—was the calling of Methodists to spread Scriptural holiness. The annotations by Asbury and Coke in the 1798 *Discipline* leave no doubt as to their position on uninterrupted succession:

The most bigoted devotees to religious establishments (the clergy of the church of Rome excepted) are now ashamed to support the doctrine of *the apostolic, uninterrupted succession of bishops*....Nor do we recollect that any writer of the Protestant churches has since attempted to defend what all the learned world at present know to be utterly indefensible. And yet nothing but an *apostolic, uninterrupted succession* can possibly confine the right of episcopacy to any particular church....It follows, therefore, indubitably, that every church has a right to choose, if it please, the *episcopal* plan.³⁰

²⁸ *The Works of John Wesley*, Bicentennial Edition, vol. 21, eds. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), p. 307.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 305.

³⁰ *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America with Explanatory Notes by Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury* (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckness, 1798), p. 6 (original emphasis).

Furthermore, the bishops pointed to the New Testament in order to emphasize that the first bishops, Timothy and Titus, were *traveling* bishops.³¹ Here we see the deep concern for itinerancy that would mark Asbury's episcopal career. Indeed, the traveling ministry was central to Asbury's understanding of the church's apostolicity. Like the apostles, Methodist ministers had a calling to take the gospel to every corner of the world. In his famous "Valedictory Address to William McKendree," Asbury even suggested that the localization of bishops was the end of the "apostolic order of things."³² Under Asbury's leadership (and following his remarkable example), early American Methodist ministers were very much a people on the move. While continuity—understood as following the model of the apostles in the New Testament—and integrity were important to them in this early period, their vocation served as the primary sign of Methodism's apostolic character³³.

When the validity of Methodist orders was challenged in the early 19th century, many ministers were quick to provide a spirited defense of Methodist ecclesiality. Perhaps the most famous of these responses was *An Original Church of Christ*, published by Nathan Bangs in 1837.³⁴ Bangs offered a detailed justification of Wesley's presbyteral ordinations, drawing upon the New Testament as the essential ecclesiological criterion. Other reflections on apostolicity by Methodists were not occasioned so much by challenges from other ecclesial traditions as by academic interest. In Britain, for example, Richard Watson offered a much

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 7.

³² Francis Asbury, *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury: In Three Volumes*, edited by Elmer T. Clark (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1958), 3:475-492.

³³ One suspects that the legacy of this early period shows through in the parallel drawn by Russell E. Richey, with Dennis M. Campbell and William B. Lawrence, between "itinerancy" as a mark of Methodism and "apostolicity" as a classical mark of the church. See Richey, Campbell, and Lawrence, *Marks of Methodism: Theology in Ecclesial Practice*, vol. 5 of *United Methodism and American Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), pp. 7-8.

³⁴ Nathan Bangs, *An Original Church of Christ: Or, A Scriptural Vindication of the Orders and Powers of the Ministry of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane for the United Methodist Church, 1837).

more measured rejection of uninterrupted episcopal succession in his *Theological Institutes*. While he regarded the idea of historical succession untenable, he did suggest that episcopacy might well be warranted by practical needs.³⁵ Indeed, practical considerations drove to a great extent the Methodist understanding of the church's nature. While willing to affirm the validity of the Methodist ministry by appeal to a variety of arguments, the central concern of early Methodism was to live out its apostolic calling.

Toward the middle of the 19th century, Methodism (particularly in North America) was marked by a series of transitions. The itinerancy largely settled, class meetings and camp meetings became rarer, and many Methodists—though certainly not all—experienced a certain upward mobility.³⁶ In the reflections on apostolicity that we see in this period, there is a notable shift from the category of *calling* to *integrity*. In other words, the more typically Protestant concern for apostolicity of faith as reflected in the New Testament comes to the fore in a more settled, mainstream Methodism. In his helpful study *In Search of the Catholic Spirit*, David M. Chapman offers an account of many of the relevant ecclesiological texts. For example, he notes that Charles Elliott's *Delineation of Roman Catholicism* subordinated the importance of episcopal succession to continuity in doctrine. For Elliott, true apostolicity was marked by the integrity of the doctrines held and proclaimed by the church.³⁷ Furthermore, Benjamin Gregory offered a substantial ecclesiological vision in his 1873 lecture *The Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints*. Gregory affirmed an unbroken apostolic succession, but he located it in the line of true believers rather than in the historic

³⁵ Richard Watson, *Theological Institutes: Or, A View of the Evidences, Doctrines, Morals, and Institutions of Christianity*, (New York: Carlton & Phillips, 1856), vol. II, p. 582.

³⁶ I offer a theological interpretation of these shifts in the article "Crucified to the World: Suffering, Itinerancy, and Transitions in American Methodist Ecclesiology," forthcoming in *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (Spring, 2008).

³⁷ David M. Chapman, *In Search of the Catholic Spirit: Methodists and Roman Catholics in Dialogue* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2004), p. 65.

episcopate.³⁸ Thus, apostolic faith was marked by authentic belief rather than episcopal ordination. These examples reflect a “settling” of the meaning of apostolicity that corresponded to the “settling” of itinerant ministry: the apostolic character of the church did not depend so much on mirroring the traveling pattern of the apostles as it depended on teaching what the apostles taught.

One other notable development can be detected in the ecumenical involvement of Methodists in the 20th century. There is no doubt that Methodists have given substantial leadership in the ecumenical movement from its earliest days. Early Methodist ecumenists tended to maintain the focus on apostolicity as doctrinal integrity described above. For example, Chapman documents Robert Newton Flew’s affirmation of fidelity to the apostolic faith—rather than “an official succession of ministers”—as the key marker of apostolicity.³⁹ Indeed, this has remained the formal position on apostolicity in Methodist bodies right down to the present day.⁴⁰ Yet, as Ted Campbell notes, “In more recent ecumenical discussions,...Methodists have signaled their willingness to consider the historic threefold ordering of ordained ministry for the sake of ecumenical unity.”⁴¹ Indeed, as Methodist involvement in Faith and Order and other ecumenical dialogues has shown, there is an openness to further signs of apostolic continuity. Yet, as *BEM* suggested, there is a reticence to see historical episcopal succession as a necessary guarantor of apostolicity. Nor is there willingness on the part of Methodist ecumenists to question the validity of Protestant

³⁸ See Chapman’s helpful summary in *In Search of the Catholic Spirit*, p. 69.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴⁰ A very recent statement from the United Methodist Council of Bishops is noteworthy: “We believe that apostolicity is based on the faithfulness of the Church through the ages rather than on historical succession.... We have a teaching of apostolic succession, but it hinges on faith, not historic leniarity.” See “Response of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church to the ‘Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church’ Issued by Pope Benedict XVI,” July 18, 2007.

⁴¹ Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), p. 67.

ministerial orders for the sake of unity. Despite these reservations, Methodists have clearly reflected the trend (noted above) of an increasingly broad understanding of apostolicity.

Tension and Hope in the Contemporary Setting

We are now in a position to consider what it might mean for Methodists to move forward in embracing a more robust vision of apostolicity. I wish to offer three specific proposals toward this end. First, *each of the three elements of apostolicity holds ecclesiological value and should be part of a comprehensive vision of apostolicity*. Despite the pervasive tendency to emphasize one or more of these dimensions, the church's apostolicity reflects its continuity, its integrity, *and* its calling. Inter-ecclesial dynamics since the Protestant Reformation have pressured particular communities to choose between visible continuity (apostolicity of ministry) and integrity of proclamation (apostolicity of faith). The pressure to make this choice should be resisted—the continuity and integrity of both faith and ministry must figure into any adequate vision of apostolicity. Granted, disagreements about *criteria* for identifying continuity and integrity persist. Yet the fruit of ecumenical dialogue, as we have seen in *BEM* and the Porvoo Common Statement, give hope that such disagreements might be resolved. In particular, the suggestion that various criteria or “signs” of apostolicity might be brought together in a manner satisfactory to divergent ecclesiologies is quite promising. Given its location in the middle of the ecclesial spectrum, Methodism is in a unique position to continue to give leadership to these efforts. Moreover, in the midst of ongoing work on continuity and integrity, the apostolic vocation of the church should not be neglected. As the early Methodist movement recognized, the church has been charged not only to maintain the faith but also to “serve the present age” in faithful ministry. While the social conditions of early Methodism are different in many ways than those of today, the apostolic calling

remains. Any declension of emphasis on this aspect of apostolicity is deeply regrettable. Only by proclaiming the gospel it has faithfully maintained can the church be truly apostolic.

Second, it should be noted that there is an inevitable tension between apostolicity and other Nicene notes of the church. *Yet these tensions can and should be embraced in order to help give contemporary Methodism its ecclesiological bearings.* It is painfully clear from the foregoing discussion that there is significant strain between the church's unity and apostolicity.

Differences on criteria for apostolicity remain a serious impediment to restored unity. In this light, the eschatological orientation of the *nota ecclesiae* becomes evident: we confess the church as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic even as we pray and work toward the fuller reality of that confession. Yet despite the pain of ongoing ecclesial division, the careful deliberation of ecumenical dialogue serves as something of a silver lining. The very reason that efforts toward unity move slowly is that the church takes seriously its confession of apostolicity. The resistance to easy or stopgap solutions may be taken as one indicator of ecclesiological substance. A cheap unity would come only with substantial costs in the long run. There is a similar tension between the holiness and apostolicity of the church. This came particularly to the fore in the Radical Reformation, where many felt pressed to decide between faithful witness and connection to the historic, visible church. The moral failures of both clergy and laity through the years have tempted many to sever ties with what appears to be a corrupted institution. Yet apostolicity demands that this tension is suffered together in community. Just as the early Christian community refused to choose between holiness and continuity, a robust contemporary apprehension of apostolicity must address the moral, doctrinal, and ministerial dimensions. Finally, Methodism in the 21st century is well aware of the tension that can emerge between commitments to inclusivity and to fidelity to the church's particular doctrinal and practical identity. This is not a new phenomenon in

Christianity; in fact, it is implicit in the church's self-identification as both catholic and apostolic. At its root, catholicity pertains to the wholeness of the faith: embracing the totality of the gospel in all the fullness of time, space, and culture. As the church lives out its confessed catholicity, the strain between wholeness and apostolic identity should not be surprising. Indeed, in this and all times, Methodists must embrace both the "inclusive" tendency of its catholicity and the "centering" tendency of its apostolicity.

A third and final proposal is that *contemporary Methodism would not only benefit from a renewed understanding of apostolicity, but also from fully living into the confessed apostolicity of the church*. This suggestion is already implicit in the affirmation that apostolicity involves calling as well as continuity and integrity. Yet it needs to be made clear that the crucial issue is not simply gaining clarity on a *doctrine* of apostolicity. The church has gained precious little if it neglects to manifest apostolicity in its concrete historical existence. For Methodists, this entails both continued ecumenical engagement and a renewed energy for proclamation, rich sacramental life, and faithful service. To return to the verse of Charles Wesley,

To serve the present age,
 [our] calling to fulfill;
O may it all [our] powers engage
 to do [our] Master's will!

In this light, Methodists are called to embrace their vocation to proclaim the apostolic faith in communion with the visible church. By doing so, they would continue to live into their place within the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.