

What Happened To Wesley At Aldersgate?

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On May 24, 1738, "about a quarter before nine" in the evening, John Wesley felt his heart "strangely warmed."¹ It is with these simple phrases that he describes for us the event which was to transform the religious life of England and America. In the judgment of the historian Lecky, "the scene which took place at that humble meeting in Aldersgate Street forms an epoch in English history. The conviction which then flashed upon one of the most powerful and most active intellects in England is the true source of English Methodism."²

Traditionally, Methodists have placed great stress upon Wesley's experience at Aldersgate. "For two centuries it has been described by his own followers as the hour of his conversion and, in their estimation, by far the most important day in his spiritual pilgrimage."³ In more recent years, however, students of Wesley have disputed about this event in Wesley's life, not only concerning the degree of its importance, but also whether or not it was the day of Wesley's conversion. We should take note of some of this controversy.

EVALUATIONS OF WESLEY'S ALDERSGATE EXPERIENCE

An American scholar, Umphrey Lee, asserts that the Aldersgate experience was "not an evangelical but a mystical conversion--that is, the conversion of a religious man to a

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1. *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London: Charles H. Kelly, n.d.), I, 475, 476. (Hereinafter referred to as *Journal*.)
 2. William E. H. Lecky, *A History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Longmans Green, and Co., 1883), II, 558.
 3. W. E. Sangster, *The Path to Perfection* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1943), p. 93.

higher state of religious devotion."⁴ Reasons advanced by Dr. Lee to support his contention are: (1) The doubts and uncertainties which harrassed Wesley on a few occasions after 1738; (2) the meager references he makes to it in subsequent writings; (3) the later corrections or modifications which Wesley made in the original description of his religious experience prior to Aldersgate; and (4) the lack of faith expressed in a letter to his brother, Charles, in 1766.⁵

An English writer, Arthur S. Yates, assesses the Aldersgate experience by saying that it *was not*: (1) an initial resolve to lead a holy life; (2) a dedication to the service of God; (3) the dawning of compassion for his fellows; (4) a marked intellectual change.⁶ Since he finds little trace of those pre-conversion elements in Wesley's religious life before Aldersgate, he therefore denies that it was Wesley's conversion. On the positive side, he asserts that "Wesley's religious transformation at Aldersgate was a Pentecostal experience"--the first occasion on which he gained an assurance of personal salvation centered in a crucified Christ.⁷ The Methodist doctrine of the Spirit's witness was traced by Wesley to its source at Aldersgate, says Yates, when he wrote in 1767: "It is confirmed in your experience and mine. The Spirit Himself bore witness to my spirit that I was a child of God, gave me an evidence thereof; and I immediately cried, 'Abba, Father.'"⁸

Bishop Fred Pierce Corson, in a small booklet written for the commemoration of the 225th Anniversary of Aldersgate, says that "Wesley was a Christian before Aldersgate. What happened there is not to be assumed as his conversion.

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4. Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936), p. 103.
 5. *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford, (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), V, 15-17. (Hereinafter referred to as *Letters*.)
 6. Arthur S. Yates, *The Doctrine of Assurance* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952), pp. 5f.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 8. *Ibid.* Wesley's quotation is from *The Standard Sermons of John Wesley*, ed. E. H. Sugden (Nashville: Publishing House M. E. Church, South, n.d.) II, 350, hereinafter referred to as *Sermons*.

Agreement has been established that the experience of conversion and Aldersgate are not identical, although they may be simultaneous. For Wesley, one followed the other."⁹

Other writers, principally Dr. Leger, a French writer,¹⁰ and Dr. Piette, a Franciscan Friar, maintain that Wesley's conversion should be dated, not in 1738, but in 1725 when he took Holy Orders. Piette argues that Wesley underwent a far deeper spiritual change in 1725 than the "gust of feeling" experienced in 1738.¹¹

On the other hand, many writers contend that May 24, 1738, was Wesley's evangelical conversion. W. R. Cannon argues strongly against the view that Wesley's real conversion was in 1725. He observes that the very same problems which harrassed and tormented Wesley prior to 1725 continued in full force up to the date of his conversion on May 24, 1738. Furthermore, says Cannon, Wesley failed again and again in his religious endeavors. Both Piette and Leger err in making conversion synonymous with moral resolve and aspiration.

But, if conversion be defined in the sense in which Wesley understood and defined it--God's own act in which a man is turned away from his former self, made to pass from darkness into light, delivered from the power of Satan unto God, made over in mind and spirit--then the experience at Aldersgate on May 24, 1738, must stand without dispute as the date of Wesley's conversion,

Cannon concludes.¹² This is also the conviction of other Wesley scholars, including Richard Green,¹³ James R. Joy,¹⁴

9. Bishop Fred Pierce Corson, *Aldersgate is For Us* (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, n.d.), p. 5.

10. Leger, *La Jeunesse de Wesley* (Paris: Libraire Hachette et Cie., 1910).

11. Maximin Piette, *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1937), p. 306.

12. William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (New York: Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), p. 68.

13. Richard Green, *The Conversion of John Wesley* (London: The Epworth Press, 1908, 1937).

14. James R. Joy, *John Wesley's Awakening* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1937).

J. Ernest Rattenbury,¹⁵ and Elmer T. Clark.¹⁶

WESLEY'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

PRIOR TO ALDERSGATE

In order that his readers might better understand the spiritual crisis of May 24, 1738, Wesley wrote a review of his religious life up to that time. He was "strictly educated and carefully taught" that he "could only be saved 'by universal obedience, by keeping all the commandments of God.'" ¹⁷ The religious emphasis was upon duty, with the result, said Wesley, "I was indeed as ignorant of the true meaning of the law as I was of the gospel of Christ." While he was a student at Oxford, he hoped to be saved by (1) not being so bad as other people; (2) having still a kindness for religion; and (3) reading the Bible, going to church, and saying his prayers.

The year 1725 was an outstanding one for Wesley, for in that year he was introduced to the writings of Jeremy Taylor and Thomas à Kempis. A year or so later he read two books by William Law. Jeremy Taylor's writings taught him that he could achieve goodness only by dedicating his whole life to God. From Thomas à Kempis he learned that obedience must be centered in the heart. William Law instructed him in the way of self-denial as the absolute fulfillment of God's law. The instruction of these writers served to abet a basic principle in Wesley's thought during this period of his life that man must be saved through moral goodness, through universal obedience, and through the rigid fulfillment of all the commandments of God. In the year 1735 he embarked for Georgia to work among the American Indians, but frankly tells us that his chief motive, to which all the rest were subordinate, was the hope of saving his own soul.¹⁸

15. J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938).

16. *What Happened At Aldersgate*, ed. Elmer T. Clark (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1938).

17. *Journal*, I, 465.

18. *Letters*, I, 188.

Upon Wesley's arrival in Georgia, a Moravian pastor, Spangenberg, probed Wesley with heart-searching questions: "Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?"¹⁹ It was an opportunity for Wesley to give a forthright witness, but he tells us very frankly that he was surprised by these questions and had no answer to give. Spangenberg observed this and probed even more closely: "Do you know Jesus Christ?" After a pause, Wesley said, "I know He is the Saviour of the world." "True; but do you know He has saved you?" Wesley answered: "I hope He has died to save me." Spangenberg added: "Do you know yourself?" Wesley said "I do," but confesses, "I fear they were vain words."²⁰ This conversation gives us a real insight into Wesley's religious state prior to Aldersgate.

After approximately two years in Georgia, Wesley returned to England. He sought help from the newly organized Moravian societies in London. Peter Bohler helped him to understand the true nature of "saving faith" such as Luther had defined it. Describing a conversation with Peter Bohler, Wesley said, "I was, on Sunday the 5th (March, 1738) clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved."²¹ At this point he subsequently wrote, "with the full Christian salvation." This period of discovery has been called Wesley's intellectual conversion. He wrote:

Immediately it struck into my mind, 'Leave off preaching. How can you preach to others, who have not faith yourself?' I asked Bohler, whether he thought I should leave it off or not. He answered, 'By no means.' I asked, 'But what can I preach?' He said, 'Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.' Accordingly, Monday the 6th (March, 1738), I began preaching this new doctrine, though my soul started back from the work.

Characterizing his pre-Aldersgate experience, Wesley described himself as "an almost Christian."²² He possessed

19. *Journal*, I, 151.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Journal*, I, 442.

22. *Sermons*, I, 61.

the religion of a servant, but not that of a son, as he tells us in his second corrective note in the 1771 edition of his *Journal* for Wednesday, February 1, 1738.²³ Writing concerning the "public offices of religion," Wesley confessed: "I myself thus attended them for many years; and yet am conscious to myself that during that whole time I had no more of the love of God than a stone."²⁴ All these characterizations give us the clue to an understanding of the change which came to Wesley at Aldersgate. Actually, the true core of the man had been untouched. While the outward actions had been rigidly drilled, the source of those actions, the heart with its desires and hopes and powers, had been quite unchanged by the saving grace of God. Consequently, there was no glad spontaneity of expression which comes from a heart that has been genuinely transformed.

ALDERSGATE, MAY 24, 1738

How very revealing are those pages in Wesley's *Journal* that tell how he spent May 24, 1738. The morning hours found him on his knees poring over the Book of God. In the afternoon he was in St. Paul's Cathedral. Yet the experience of "the strangely warmed heart" came to him in a simple evening service in an ordinary building--just a society meeting in Aldersgate Street. But let us hear Wesley's own account of that memorable occasion--

I think it was about five this morning, that I opened my Testament on these words, 'There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that ye should be partakers of the divine nature' (II Peter 1:4). Just as I went out, I opened it again on these words, 'Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.' In the afternoon I was asked to go to St. Paul's. The anthem was, 'Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord, hear my voice. O let Thine ears consider well the voice of my complaint. If Thou, Lord, wilt be extreme to mark what is done amiss, O Lord, who

23. *Journal*, I, 423. Cf. *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* ed. Thomas Jackson, I, 76 (London: John Mason, 1829), 14 Vols., hereinafter referred to as *Works*.

24. *Works*, VIII, 61.

may abide it? For there is mercy with Thee; therefore shalt Thou be feared. O Israel, trust in the Lord: for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is plenteous redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his sins.' In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, *I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.* I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, 'This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?' Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth them, according to the counsels of His own will [*italics added*].²⁵

As Richard Green points out,

It must be seen, that from his own point of view, this extract described a very deep and definite change in his religious experience, which might, without a misuse of language, be termed a conversion. There is a striking and touching grandeur in this simple but minute description of a critical passage in the spiritual life of an earnest soul wholly absorbed in the great change it was undergoing. And the event stands alone in its stateliness and significant teaching.²⁶

Wesley's heart had received a divine touch and assurance. It is in the light of this transformation that Wesley came to

25. *Journal*, I, 472, 475, 476.

26. Green, *op. cit.*, pp. 36, 37.

contrast so often "the heart of stone" with the "heart of flesh," mere "outside-religion" with "heart-religion." Writing a description of conversion in 1740, Wesley said: "Their stony heart was broken in pieces before they received remission of sins; yet it continued hard; but now it is melted down, is soft, tender, and susceptible of any impression."²⁷ Actually, Wesley was relating the experience of others (even as we all must do) in terms of his own. Henceforth, obedience had now its true place as the glad response of the heart to the call of love. Duty flowed out of a heart that was now grace constrained, and not because it was legally bound to perform certain deeds.

Release from legal bondage had come to Charles Wesley on May 21, 1738. In his *Journal* on May 23 he tells us that "at nine I began an hymn upon my conversion," which was the first hymn he ever wrote. He also records that on the night of May 24, following John's experience at Aldersgate, he was visited by his brother, accompanied by some, if not all, of the Aldersgate congregation. "About ten," he writes, "my brother was brought in triumph by a troop of friends." "I believe!" cried John. The two spiritually awakened brothers and their friends sang the hymn of conversion that Charles had written the day before.

Where shall my wondering soul begin?
How shall I all to heaven aspire?
A slave redeemed from death and sin,
A brand plucked from eternal fire,
How shall I equal triumphs raise,
Or sing my great Deliverer's praise?

Small wonder that it has been called the "Birth-Song" of the Methodist Revival!²⁸

THE FRUIT OF ALDERSGATE

A new emphases came in Wesley's ministry as a result of his "intellectual" conversion in March, 1738, and his "spiritual" conversion on May 24, 1738. Eighteen days after his conscious experience of the new life at Aldersgate, Wesley preached at

27. *Works*, XIV, 340.

28. *What Happened At Aldersgate*, *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 21.

Oxford on June 11, 1738, his famous sermon on "Salvation by Faith." In a letter to his mother on July 29, 1725, Wesley called faith "an assent upon rational grounds.... Faith must necessarily at length be resolved into reason."²⁹ Now, following Aldersgate, Wesley says that saving faith

is not barely a speculative, rational thing, a cold, lifeless assent, a train of ideas in the head; but also a disposition of the heart.... Christian faith is, then, not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ; a trust in the merits of His life, death, and resurrection; a recumbency upon Him as our atonement and our life, as given for us, and living in us. It is a sure confidence which a man hath in God, that through the merits of Christ, his sins are forgiven, and he reconciled to the favour of God; and, in consequence hereof, a closing with Him, and cleaving to Him, as our 'wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption,' or, in one word, our salvation.³⁰

Now fully in possession of a new truth, or better, possessed by an old truth, a new power and influence comes to Wesley's preaching. Here is Wesley's own significant evaluation of his preaching ministry:

(1) From the year 1725 to 1729 I preached much, but saw no fruit of my labour. Indeed, it could not be that I should; for I neither laid the foundation of repentance, nor of believing the gospel; taking it for granted, that all to whom I preached were believers, and that many of them 'needed no repentance.'

(2) From the year 1729 to 1734, laying a deeper foundation of repentance, I saw a little fruit. But it was only a little; and no wonder: for I did not preach faith in the blood of the Covenant.

(3) From 1734 to 1738, speaking more of faith in Christ, I saw more fruit of my preaching, and visiting from house to house, than ever I had done before; though I know not if any of those who were outwardly reformed were inwardly and thoroughly converted to God.

29. *Letters*, I, 23.

30. *Sermons*, I, 40, 41.

(4) From 1738 to this time, speaking continually of Jesus Christ, laying Him only for the foundation of the whole building, making Him all in all, the first and the last; preaching only on this plan, 'The kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye and believe the gospel'; the 'word of God ran' as fire among the stubble; it 'was glorified' more and more; multitudes crying out, 'What must we do to be saved?' and afterwards witnessing, 'By grace we are saved through faith.'³¹

In one of the early Conferences with his preachers (May 13, 1746), the question was asked, "Wherein does our doctrine now differ from that we preached at Oxford?" This pertinent answer was given: "Chiefly in these two points; (1) We then knew nothing of that righteousness of faith, in justification; nor (2) Of the nature of faith itself, as implying consciousness of pardon."³²

It is significant that only one of Wesley's sermons preached prior to Aldersgate is included in his *Standard Sermons*. It is his sermon on "The Circumcision of the Heart," delivered at St. Mary's, Oxford, before the University on January 1, 1733. Most significant for this paper is the fact that when Wesley published this sermon in 1748 he added a fresh half paragraph to his description of faith, which now reads:

...that faith, which is not only an unshaken assent to all that God hath revealed in Scripture...But likewise the revelation of Christ in our hearts; a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free, unmerited love to me a sinner: a sure confidence in his pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost: a confidence, whereby every true believer is enabled to bear witness, 'I know that my redeemer liveth,' that I have an 'advocate with the Father,' and 'the propitiation for my sins'--I know he hath 'loved me, and given himself for me'--he hath reconciled me, even me, to God: and I 'have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins.'³³

31. *Works*, VIII, 468, 469.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 290.

33. *Sermons*, I, 270, 271.

In between these two dates (1733 and 1748) had come the heart-warming experience of 1738. There is a striking parallel between this significant addition and Wesley's testimony given in the *Journal* for May 24, 1738.

There are many instances in Wesley's long life in which he referred to the spring of 1738 as the beginning of his vital faith and his true understanding of the Christian doctrine of salvation, as well as his success as a preacher of the Gospel. Elmer T. Clark enumerates no less than twenty of these in his book, *What Happened At Aldersgate*.³⁴ One of the most significant is to be found in Wesley's letter to "John Smith" (Bishop Thomas Secker ?) on December 30, 1745. He wrote:

...It is true that, from May 24, 1738, 'wherever I was desired to preach, salvation by faith was my only theme'--that is, such a love of God and man as produces all inward and outward holiness, and springs from a conviction, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost, of the pardoning love of God; and that, when I was told, 'You must preach no more in this church,' it was commonly added, 'because you preach such doctrine!' And it is equally true that 'it was preaching the love of God and man that several of the clergy forbade me their pulpits' before that time, May 24, before I either preached or knew salvation by faith.³⁵

Still another instance is found in a letter addressed to Dr. Thomas Rutherford on March 28, 1768:

You charge me...with maintaining contradictions. I answer: (1) If all my sentiments were compared together, from the year 1725 to 1768, there would be truth in the charge; for during the latter part of this period I have relinquished several of my former sentiments. (2) During these last thirty years I may have varied in some of my sentiments or expressions without observing it....Nevertheless (5) I believe there will be found few if any real contradictions in what I have published for nearly thirty years.³⁶

Other evidence could be noted from Wesley's writings, but these observations should be sufficient to indicate that Alders-

34. *What Happened At Aldersgate, op. cit.*, pp. 34-38.

35. *Letters*, II, 65.

36. *Letters*, V, 357, 358.

gate was the culminating point in a spiritual quest for Wesley, and that the experience which came to him on May 24, 1738, exerted a permanent influence over his subsequent life and thought.

There is indirect evidence to Wesley's Aldersgate experience in the testimony of his mother in 1739. On Monday, September 3, 1739, he wrote in his *Journal*.³⁷

I talked largely with my mother, who told me that, till a short time since, she had scarce heard such a thing mentioned as having forgiveness of sins now, or God's Spirit bearing witness with our spirit; much less did she imagine that this was the common privilege of all true believers. 'Therefore,' said she, 'I never durst ask for it myself. But two or three weeks ago, while my son Hall was pronouncing those words, in delivering the cup to me, 'The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee,' the words struck through my heart, and I knew God for Christ's sake had forgiven *me* all *my* sins.'

It is undoubtedly true that the Christian faith is more effectively "caught" than "taught," and that "one loving heart sets another on fire." It is precisely for this reason that the Methodist Revival spread so rapidly in the eighteenth century. While both Scripture and history attest the validity of the "strangely warmed heart," how much more significant it is that each of us has the experimental proof in his own heart! The experience of salvation continues to live, in part, at least, on what it produces. The significance of this is seen in the life and labors of John Wesley. The spiritual reality and certainty he found at Aldersgate on May 24, 1738, made him the inspired leader of one of the greatest revivals since the times of the Apostles and the founder of world Methodism. If the pulpit in our time has lost its note of authority and certainty, and the pew its power of a warm, personal testimony of the reality of Christ as Saviour in the heart and the knowledge of sins forgiven, its remedy is to be found in the glow of the certainty of salvation. May once again there be a new invasion of God's Spirit as there was in Wesley's day!

37. *Journal*, II, 267.