

How Can Aldersgate Be Recovered In Our Day?

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The coming of the anniversary of Aldersgate quite normally prompts the question which constitutes the title of this study. There is an utterly irrelevant sense in which this question could be taken. We are not interested in recovering the external accompaniments of the "Aldersgate event." We are not particularly enamored with the spot in which it occurred. Our concern is not to stop business in the little London bank on Aldersgate Street, to raze the building, and to restore the simple structure of the little chapel. Nor do we care to build a shrine to mark the spot. The plaque on the bank building is enough. We do not seek a building, an environment, a Preface to the Epistle to the Romans, men in powdered wigs, complicated English dress of the eighteenth century, a certain ritual, nor, indeed, the lack of form. We seek not the external phenomena but an inner, heart-warming, transforming experience.

There is another sense in which we do not seek Aldersgate. In the depths of every truly effective religious experience there is a uniqueness that should not and, indeed, cannot be copied. It reflects the individuality and variety of human personality and the wisdom of God in adapting His grace to the human temperament and capacity. The need for today is not millions of John Wesleys. Rather, we need millions of people of our generation in our lands to whom God is equally real and who are open channels to His grace.

It is in this last sense that Aldersgate is a deeply relevant and highly urgent matter for us all. Though the majority of Americans belong to some church, and though millions over the world belong to the church that sprang from Aldersgate, there is not a corresponding distribution of the vital experience of peace, power, and effectiveness. Too many plod the barren treadmill that Wesley knew before May 24, 1738. For many of them, form of religion has never broken through to reality. Ethics has never been lifted above legalism by a surge of life. Mysticism has been but a flight of the imagination or a self-

hypnosis. The heart has not been strangely warmed by the assurance of a vibrant faith. There is no free pardon nor abundant life.

It is not that our day demands no such equipment for life as Wesley found two hundred twenty-five years ago. The world today also totters on the brink of disaster. And the most significant weakness is still in the moral and spiritual realm. Guilty, wayward man cannot stand alone. Though great things are happening in science, knowledge, and politics, man is still basically the victim of his own devices--lacking the direction, purpose, or power to arrive at real meaning. There is a skeleton in the closet. Even the church member too often knows in his heart of hearts that he is still but a pagan in life. Emptiness, folly, and condemnation are much more real to him than life, peace, and pardon. He does not really know God. He has not risen above the dubious refinements of humanism. Though preoccupied with human values and enjoying the by-products of the Christian faith of others, he still is largely a frustrated, defeated pagan.

This is not because God wills it. Grace is as adequate as ever. No expiration date was put on the announcement of the Gospel. The real need of the twentieth century is not basically different from that of the eighteenth. Nor is God's changeless grace. There is variety in the face and fashion of human society and in man's ways of expressing his false independence. But these are surface differences. Sin and salvation are deeper facts. God's remedy is no less effective than in earlier centuries. Life still begins with a birth. There is no vitality without it. With it, there is endless potential. It is this new beginning that Aldersgate has for our day.

Yes, Aldersgate can be recovered in our day. The arm of God is not shortened. The next question is "How?"

To those reared in the evangelical tradition, the answer appears self-evident. It is the simple gospel message of individual salvation by faith. Penitently and trustingly "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). With one's back turned to every other hope, depending solely on Christ and His atonement, every man can say with Wesley, "I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my 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." Every man can know this "change which God works in the heart through

faith in Christ." Every man can rise a new creature in Christ Jesus to walk in heaven's own light.

Multiply this by a sufficient number in the eighteenth century and you have the Evangelical Revival. Multiply it in our day and Aldersgate is recovered. It is revival. New Testament vitality is restored to religion. Written small, it is individual salvation. Written large, it is a sweeping revival--whatever the outer forms and accompaniments may be. Whatever brings genuine New Testament revival on the individual level or to the group at large--that is the way to recover Aldersgate in our day.

The ready answers on the tip of one's tongue are: prayer, preaching the Word, witnessing, repentance, faith, consistent living, obedience. As the Lord said to Solomon, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and heal their land" (II Chron. 7:14). The essence of sin is rebellion--a false independence. The essence of true religion is return to God--a true relationship. The meaning of Aldersgate is in this return. Adequacy is in God. He never fails His own. It is an old, old formula. All true religion in the world is an expression of this humble, penitent, trusting return to God. It has worked. It does work. And it will continue to work. This is revival. This is the original Aldersgate. This is Aldersgate recovered on an individual level. And, experienced on a broader scale, this is Aldersgate restored to a movement.

The heart cry of us all, of course, is a broader recovery that will quicken the Church and restore her to effectiveness. We want to see the Church recover spiritual power and leadership. Her mission is more than sociological and humanitarian. She must deal with fundamental and eternal issues. She must witness to the truth and bring men to God. Only the quickened can quicken others. The holy contagion of divine life must again sweep the Church and the world. The only alternative is disaster.

How can this be done? Can it be phrased in a proposition that will guarantee the desired results? And can it be elaborated into a list of methods or "five easy lessons"? Obviously, caution must be exercised here. The answer is so simple that the wayfaring man, though a fool, need not err. Yet it is so comprehensive that it challenges the best in the greatest of men. It evades the highest human efforts and responds only to the power of God. The disease is as complex as sin. And the

remedy is as complex as God himself. For, basically, the task is to reunite lost man with his Maker.

A few observations, however, are in order about this recovery.

IT IS FROM GOD

No human prescriptions or techniques will produce the power of Aldersgate. "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God; Not of works lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10). Assurance of salvation can never be a human achievement. No man is good enough to merit eternal life. Nor is he wise enough to judge truly the level to which he has attained. Hence all human attempts at salvation and assurance are doomed to failure. It is "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour" (Titus 3:5, 6). What Wesley had failed to achieve by the various means of grace, by labors abundant in England and Georgia, and by strict discipline, he found at Aldersgate when he threw himself upon the mercy of God. Aldersgate, if it is to be recovered, will come from above. It is from God.

This does not mean that efforts are irrelevant or methods unimportant. On the contrary, the great Mr. Finney declared that "a revival is the result of the right use of the appropriate means"¹ He reasoned that the means which God enjoined for the production of a revival tend to produce a revival. That is why God enjoined them. The means will not, of course, produce a revival without the blessing of God. But, says he, "no more will grain, when it is sowed, produce a crop without the blessing of God." The analogy is clear. Both material and spiritual blessings appear according to laws that must be followed if they are to be enjoyed. The gift is from God and is for those who

1. Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York: Revell, 1838), p. 13.

meet the conditions on which it can be received. We will look at some of these means and methods as the paper progresses.

IT MUST BE DESIRED

Aldersgate is not recovered by indifferent people. It is God's specific answer to a very specific need. Wesley's heart had been hungry since university days at least. In many respects he lived more diligently than many people who have claimed their Aldersgate and Pentecost experiences. His very frustration in not achieving assurance by his own righteousness drove him to greater carefulness. He says:

I diligently strove against all sin. I omitted no sort of self-denial which I thought lawful. I carefully used, both in public and in private, all the means of grace at all opportunities. I omitted no occasion for doing good: I for that reason suffered evil. And all this I knew to be nothing, unless as it was directed toward inward holiness. Accordingly this, the image of God was what I aimed at in all, by doing his will, not my own.²

All this, of course, proved futile. It became, as he said, a refined way of trusting to his own works and his own righteousness. It left him in the misery and defeat of Romans 7. He sought "not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law." But his struggle did, over a period of a dozen years or so, indicate the sincerity and intensity of his desire for a living faith and a true holiness. Such a heart was not left in darkness.

This is the invitation: "What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them" (Mark 11:24). Desire must be specific enough to issue in definite petition. And, as Wesley finally learned, the petition must depend not on the arm of flesh but on God. Therein is the assurance of an answer. In matters of spiritual blessing and divine presence, the promise is all the more explicit: "If from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and with all thy soul" (Deut. 4:29).

2. *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock (Std. ed., London: Robert Culley, 1909), I, 468.

As desire must be specific and strong for one's own personal Aldersgate, so it must be for the restoration of others. Little is done to shake the world with such platitudes as "Lord bless everybody and cause that many shall turn to righteousness." It is when renewed people become concerned about other individuals that things begin to happen. As another's salvation becomes a major private concern of Christians, hope rises.

As Finney says, "A revival may be expected when Christians have a spirit of prayer for a revival."³ This he defines as praying as if their hearts were set upon a revival. It includes a feeling of the need and feeling for their own families and neighbors until they pray for them as if they could not be denied. It is prayer with a purpose that supercedes all other purposes.

Finney calls this strong purpose a spirit of prayer. It is a state of the heart--a continual desire and anxiety of mind for the salvation of sinners. He says:

It is something that weighs them down. It is the same, so far as the philosophy of the mind is concerned, as when a man is anxious for some worldly interest. A Christian who has this spirit of prayer feels anxious for souls. It is the subject of his thoughts all the time, and makes him look and act as if he had a load on his mind. He thinks of it by day, and dreams of it by night. This is properly praying without ceasing...This deep, continual, earnest desire for the salvation of sinners, is what constitutes the spirit of prayer for a revival. It is a revival begun so far as this spirit of prayer extends. When this feeling exists in a church, unless the Spirit is grieved away by sin, there will infallibly be a revival of Christians generally, and it will involve the conversion of sinners to God.⁴

Perhaps the greatest reason that Aldersgate is not more widely recovered is that so few really desire it and that those who do want it are not constant enough in their concern. It is too easy to be satisfied without it. As long as that is true, it may be unrealistic to expect great movings of the Holy Spirit

3. Finney, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

or great moves of man toward God. Christ is the Pearl of Great Price. Only as we are willing to part with the lesser pearls can we afford Him. It is never enough for Him to be prominent in our desires. He must be pre-eminent.

Wesley said to his preachers, "You have no business but to save souls." This becomes more than a desire. It must be a passion that gives perspective. Goals are sorted in relation to it. This becomes central. Everything else becomes peripheral. Indeed, everything else must prove its contribution directly or indirectly to this end or relinquish its claim to a place in one's life. This is to be Christ-centered. And Christ-centered folk lead their fellows to Aldersgate. They have an eye single to the glory of God. And herein is God glorified that they bear fruit.

Thus was the rise of the Wesleyan Societies in England. Warmth and peace came to the heart of John Wesley. He immediately "began to pray with all his might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used him and persecuted him." His concern for souls overcame all handicaps. When churches were closed to him, he preached in the open air and even from his father's tombstone. Before the next year was ended,

There came to Mr. Wesley in London, eight or ten persons who appeared to be deeply convinced of sin, and earnestly groaning for redemption. They desired (as did two or three more the next day) that he would spend some time with them in prayer, and advise them how to flee from the wrath to come, which they saw continually hanging over their heads.⁵

This was the beginning of the great class meeting movement--the church within a church--which, in large measure became organized Methodism. It was the extension of Aldersgate, communicated to others.

GOD'S METHOD IS MEN

A fire cannot be started by a mere application of a theory of pyrodynamics. Heat is applied from another combustible article. Thus temperature is raised to the kindling point in

5. *Wesleyan Methodist Discipline*, Articles 42, 43.

the object to be kindled. Likewise in setting hearts aflame, God uses other human hearts. No abstract principles or neat rules will suffice. God's method is men.

No amount of theorizing will create the warm heart and the heavenly assurance. Correct doctrine, important as it is, can be very cold and dead. Proper ritual can fall on heavy ears or empty pews. Clever techniques can reflect shallowness and insincerity. The precise and proper can exalt the human more than it reveals the Divine. Impersonal religion can be as ineffective as the lecture method has been accused of being when the notes of the professor become the notes of the student without passing through the mind of either.

From such deadness the Church was delivered by Aldersgate. Hearts aflame kindled other hearts until the fire swept two continents for God and set the stage for the modern world missionary movement. God's method is men. The fire catches and gains momentum as the contagion spreads.

Though God frequently surprises His people with fire in unsuspected places, there are some observations that can be made. There are key men in every situation. On the responsiveness of these hangs the outcome. God has no panaceas apart from people. It pleases God to build the fire first in the hearts of men. When the flame becomes hot, this person is thrust into close contact with another person--one whose heart God has prepared. The fire catches and each gives heat to the other. The process is repeated again and again. Soon, like a pile of logs in a roaring camp fire, the heat mingles into a consuming blaze. This is revival--Aldersgate multiplied.

Who are these key men? A natural starting place is a pastor--one to whom the privilege has been granted of specializing in spiritual things and to whom the care of souls has been committed. And of pastors, who would be more likely candidates than those of the Wesleyan tradition--graduates of the leading holiness seminary? Who should know Aldersgate better? Who should prize it more highly? Who should experience it more deeply? And who should share it more effectively? A sacred trust has been committed to us. Scholarship is important. Skills are necessary. Cooperation is vital. Techniques are indispensable. But all this to one end--that the fire may burn. Men are lost without the Saviour. They must personally trust in Him. Salvation must become real and transforming. They are dying for "The Gospel According To You."

What is said of the pastor can be said of the evangelist, the teacher, the administrator, and, indeed, the layman. All are "set in the church" for the life of the whole. Unless the heart is kindled, fanned, and fed by the combined heat of all, the logs will be scattered, grow cold, become charred, lose their readiness for combustion, and remain more as a relic of a better day. The evangelist must keep the gospel of a warm heart before us. The teacher must dwell on its implications. The administrator must keep its promotion central. The layman also must witness to its effectiveness and demonstrate it in everyday living. And all must make this the central concern of life--the heavenly flame that meets one's personal need and becomes a passion for others. We may have to do other things to make a living. But this is our business. This is our life. We are God's method of saving the world. The world is our parish. God's method is men.

GOD MUST HAVE PRE-EMINENCE

Revival illustrates in a marked way both the mystery and paradox of answered prayer. As we have noted, until there is real earnestness in man, there is no Aldersgate. Yet no amount of human zeal or effort can produce the result. Compare Elijah and the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel. Elijah's action was no casual incident. For three years and six months he had held steady against the king, against the wicked and strong-willed queen, against the insidious and immoral cult of Baal and Ashtaroath, and under the weight of a devastating famine. Now he dared to face the fury of the wicked rulers and the whole diabolical system of false religion. What more could be asked of mortal man? Yet Elijah's manner was calm and quiet. It was the priests of Baal who were excited. Judged by action, they were the men of religious power. Observe the spectacle--hundreds of priests crying out all day to their gods. Finally, as the day fades, they become desperate. They run upon the altar. They sacrifice their own blood, cutting themselves. Surely this will attract the attention of whatever gods there be. This must be revival indeed. But, no there is no answer. Calmly Elijah chides them. Perhaps their gods are asleep or away on a vacation. Try harder! They whip themselves to a frenzy, but to no avail. This is only misdirected human enthusiasm.

Then Elijah acted in quiet confidence--yet in deadly earnestness. He requested an overwhelming handicap. The sacrifice was drenched with water. Then Elijah prayed a few words and the fire fell. Before the day ended, the priests lay dead and the people were saying, "The Lord, he is the God; the Lord, he is the God."

What is the difference? It is all in the relationship to God. The secret is that God must have the pre-eminence. If one seeks the warm heart as one takes a ride on the "Bobs" or the "Cyclone" in the amusement park--just for the thrill, there may be a good deal of excitement and activity. But there will be no personal or widespread Aldersgate. True revival exalts the Lord. He must have the pre-eminence. Elijah was not concerned to build himself a name. He prayed, "Hear me, O Lord, that the people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned back their heart again" (I Kings 18:37). It was then that the fire fell.

Karl Stolz in *The Psychology of Religious Living* distinguishes between action and reaction mysticism. The priests of Baal, by their own actions, sought to force their way into the presence of deity and to control deity. This is action mysticism. Elijah, in obedience to Deity, sought to respond appropriately to Divine revelation. This is reaction mysticism. This is Christian. The other is pagan. In reaction mysticism, the initiative is God's. Man's place is obedience. Both built an altar. Both made sacrifice. Both prayed. But where God had taken the initiative and was so recognized, He answered by fire.

Herein lies the delicate balance of all true prayer, and especially of prayer for any proper mystical experience. There must be concern, petition, and action. But there must be constant sensitivity to God's initiative, to God's will, to the Spirit's moving, and to the glory of God. In all things He must have the pre-eminence. A revival that does not come from God and glorify God is no revival at all. It is an emotional orgy in the flesh.

METHODS STILL MATTER

Again it must be emphasized that no method, operated simply by human power and on a human level, can bring Aldersgate. God's method is men--aflame with the love and grace of God--empowered and directed by His Holy Spirit.

Yet there is much to be learned about better ways of doing things. And a passion for souls will compel one to use the best methods of which he is capable. Indeed, much of the work of the Holy Spirit is administrative--guiding us in methods of carrying out the Christian mission. And the purpose of human intelligence itself is that it may be used to improve effectiveness.

Mass evangelism is not out of date. Nor is it in danger of becoming so. Whenever there has been a great move toward God, crowds have gathered and listened to the Word. And it has often been in the crowd that God has singled out open hearts and made His great thrust. Mass meetings can never be ignored as long as God chooses to use preaching for the spread of the Gospel. Foolish indeed is the minister who does not do his best to make effective use of the mass media of the platform and its auxiliaries in radio, television, and the press.

But mass media are never an adequate substitute for the less glamorous approaches. The most effective soul-winners have been just as zealous and effective in dealing with individuals or small groups. Witness Jesus at the well, on the housetop, at dinner, with the Twelve, and with the Three. Observe Philip with the eunuch and Paul with the jailor. Or, later, note Moody's zeal for personal evangelism, and the elaborate work for the individual in a Billy Graham campaign. Whenever religion is a vibrant testimony of "know so" salvation, it is contagious. And contagion is as personal and individual as catching the measles. Though thousands about you have the same experience, it is no less personal, real, and decisive in your case. In fact, the mass meetings are only groups of individuals meeting together for certain advantages. The revival of concern for the individual is a hopeful sign in the quest for the recovery of Aldersgate, whether it be expressed in "salvation by appointment," street witnessing, hospital visitation, house to house visitation, or a thousand other ways.

Small groups, too, can furnish a dynamic situation to help focus attention on spiritual concerns. In his book, *New Life in the Church*, Richard Raines says that "In churches of several hundred members, Christian fellowship can be known by most people only in some small group." It is certainly true that large crowds do not always tend to bring one to personal decision. Nor will many needy souls take private initiative to seek spiritual help. But thousands are finding their Aldersgate

in small groups that meet for Bible study, fellowship, or prayer. Mr. Raines cites in his book many instances of conversion from small spiritual groups, as he calls them, composed of existing groups within the church that find a common concern for spiritual discovery. Choirs, circles, committees, membership classes, and youth groups can be opened to a real sharing in which the Holy Spirit is free to work. Business men's luncheon clubs have facilitated effective witnessing and guidance. Prayer cells are established with great profit. Cottage prayer meetings still have a value, though patterns are not always as they were fifty years ago. The form is not so significant as the fact. Small groups have been effective from the first prayer meeting by the riverside in Philippi or the early meetings of the Apostles down through the Wesleyan class meetings to the present prayer cells. And they will survive in some form as long as Aldersgate and Pentecost are craved by hungry hearts.

HOW CAN ALDERSGATE BE RECOVERED?

When man wants God, returns to God, and helps others to do the same--by whatever method he can find--Aldersgate will be recovered. This has been demonstrated in every generation. Ours is no exception. But it must be truly desired. And God must be supreme. He must be the recognized source. And to Him must be the glory. Then the Holy Spirit will guide and empower the earnest heart as he uses the methods available to him.