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Wesley in Focus

John Wesley once said: "If your heart be as mine, give me your hand." He was speaking of a brotherhood which surpasses all differences of opinion, form, and practice, namely a brotherhood of the spirit based on a common experience and a united faith. In this sense, Wesley has become a symbol of ecumenical and international unity; all Christians with a warm heart (and some who long for such an experience) accept his invitation and recognize its background in Wesley's own life. And so, Aldersgate has become the motto of a new ecumenicity, the ecumenicity of the heart. It should not surprise us, then, that this Wesley symposium, published on the occasion of the 225th anniversary of Wesley's heartwarming experience at Aldersgate, includes interpretations of this event by an English Methodist, Frank Baker, and a Scots Presbyterian, James T. Cleland.

However, Wesley's place in history includes also his opinions. If, as most of us willingly recognize, Wesley was able to testify to something characteristically Christian in the area of religious experience, it is also true to say, as an increasing number of theologians do say, that he had an almost uncanny ability to express the central and characteristic elements of Christian faith and thought. Thus Wesley gains importance also for the ecumenical mind. This is the clear implication of the three other papers that comprise our Wesley issue, in which an American Methodist, Harmon L. Smith; a Latvian Lutheran, Egil Grislis; and a Norwegian Methodist, the undersigned, attempt to show Wesley's views on justification, sacrament, and the Christian's life, both as compared to the views of other reformers and in reference to the sober centrality and meticulous balance to be found there.

This issue of the BULLETIN carries a great potential influence within its pages. We hope that this potential will be released as its content passes from the page, through the eye, to the mind and the heart of the reader. It should be read with much searching and much prayer. And as one prays, one might also include a word of thanks for the toil and expense which lie buried under the roots of this expanded issue.

—T. H.

Aldersgate 1738-1963

The Challenge of Aldersgate

FRANK BAKER

The great events in the constantly unfolding story of God's relations with man remain mysteries—the creation of the world and its human inhabitants, the creation of your baby, and mine; the birth of God in the likeness of man; the rebirth of man in the likeness of God. Sometimes we accept these things in simple faith, which is good. Sometimes we accept them with simple minds, which is bad. We ought to ask questions about God's mysteries, for thus we learn more of His nature and of our own. And the more we learn to understand the mysteries of human life the better equipped we are to live.

The birth of every baby offers challenges to society in general, and especially to the child's parents. What strange series of events brought us to this day? What is wrapped up in this tiny bundle of unfolding elements and elemental desires? What purpose does it have in the mind of the eternal God? What demands does it make upon us as individuals? Every birth presents such challenging questions, and some more than others.

Every spiritual rebirth offers similar challenges, but again some raise more questions than others. As we look back through Christian history, we realize that the conversions of a number of men have radically changed the course of history, and have cast the mantle of their influence even over our own lives. If we are to understand the ways of God with us, it is desirable, perhaps essential, to know more about the ways of God with them. We think of the conversions of Paul, of Augustine, of Luther, of Wesley, all similar, yet all different. Of them all perhaps that of John Wesley is the most taken for granted by Methodists and the least understood. His spiritual rebirth is the least understood not because we do not wish to understand, or will not take trouble to understand, but because the mysteries surrounding it are more numerous.

The final word about what happened to John Wesley in Aldersgate Street, London, on May 24, 1738, has not yet been spoken, nor will it be spoken tonight. The books devoted solely to this event run into two figures, and those dealing with it at length into three figures. None of them, however, convince me, nor probably you, that the mystery has been explained—certainly not explained away. We have

[An address delivered at the "Aldersgate Around the World" gathering in Winston-Salem, May 24, 1963.]

yet more questions to ask, more tentative answers to frame, and revise, and possibly discard in the light of further evidence and further study. But we must not ignore the challenge of Aldersgate, for as we face up to it we can become both better Methodists and—what is far more important—better Christians.

I propose, therefore, to speak about the challenge of Aldersgate, the questions that this mystery prompts in different men, or in the same men in their diverse manifestations, the challenge of Aldersgate to the historian, to the psychologist, to the theologian, and to the practicing Christian.

I

John Wesley's experience at Aldersgate challenges the historian both in sundry details and in its general significance in Wesley's life. The essential paragraph which will reverberate around the world tonight is well known, but we should remind ourselves of it here, remembering that it is the climax of a thousand-word spiritual autobiography in eighteen numbered sections, some of these sections recounting familiar facts, others sheltering historical puzzles, all of them revealing an ardent seeker after God from his youth up. Section 14 runs thus (I quote from the first edition, 1740, of the second *Extract of the Rev. Mr. John Wesley's Journal*, which covered the period "from February 1, 1737-8, to his return from Germany"): "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 thro' Faith in *Christ*, I felt my Heart strangely warm'd. 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."

Among the historian's many unanswered questions about this are a number upon relatively unimportant though interesting details. Whereabouts in Aldersgate Street did this event take place? At least three sites are possible, but none of them is certain. What kind of a society met there? An old one or a new one? Almost certainly it was a new one founded in Nettleton Court, just off Aldersgate Street, by John Wesley's devoted protégé, James Hutton, who later became a leading Moravian, but was at the time a good Anglican son of a good Anglican priest in whose home at Westminster another

religious society met. Were the people attending this gathering Anglicans, Moravians, both, or neither? No one is absolutely sure, but the evidence seems to favor a group of Anglicans with a strong sprinkling of Moravians. What kind of a meeting were they holding that evening, to which John Wesley went "very unwillingly"? Probably—but by no means certainly—an informal "conference" beginning at eight p.m. with singing and prayer, and continuing with personal testimonies, exhortation, conversation, or the reading of some improving letter or book, according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

What about Paul and Luther? Who was reading what? The reader was possibly a painter named William Holland, a good Anglican who became a prominent Moravian but returned to the Church of England before his death in 1761. It was Holland who had introduced Charles Wesley to Luther's commentary on Galatians, and was himself converted while Wesley read the preface aloud. Charles Wesley kept the volume to study, and was especially moved by Luther's comment on Gal.2:20: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Luther emphasized, and Charles Wesley's hymns after his conversion echoed him, the words *me* and *for me*. So also did John Wesley in his Aldersgate account, printing in Lutheran italics "that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death." Does this mean that it was in fact Luther's preface to *Galatians* that Holland (or someone else) was reading in that meeting? Probably not. Luther's emphasis on the personal appropriation of Christ by the believer was surely familiar to John as well as to Charles, and remained with him even as Luther's preface to *Romans* was being read—whether in Latin, German, or English remains uncertain, though the latter is likely.

The passage might have been one in an old English translation containing these words: "Faith alone justifies. . . . Faith through the merit of Christ obtaineth the Holy Spirit, which doth make us new hearts, doth exhilarate us, doth excite and inflame our heart, that it may do those things willingly, of love, which the Law commandeth." Did this phrase about "inflaming our heart" in fact suggest the terms in which Wesley described his own experience—"I felt my heart strangely warmed"? We do not know, but it is at least possible, as it is also possible that the remembered Galatians passage led to his emphasis on the personal pronouns.

Do you remember Wesley's first reaction to this experience?

"I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me." Did he have anyone in particular in mind? The ruling clique that forced him out of Savannah? The ministers who had closed their pulpits to him since he had begun to preach about faith? William Law, who had neglected to urge faith upon him? We do not know. We think that we can visualize him in his next reaction, however, as he jumps to his feet and testifies openly to all present what he now first felt in his heart. And we can understand something of his sobered questionings when he realized that the transports of joy supposedly inseparable from this experience were missing. At least he was sure of one thing, the certainty that formed the burden of his proclamation when he burst triumphantly into Charles Wesley's lodgings in nearby Little Britain: "I believe!"

We are faced with so many questions about details, however, that we can be excused for hesitating momentarily about the trustworthiness of the account as a whole. This is increased when we realize that it was written down at the earliest a day or two later, and probably weeks later, nor was it published until two years afterward. Unfortunately Wesley's diary, which he had begun as part of his pursuit of holiness thirteen years earlier, is not available for the period from May to September, 1738, the volume which should contain it having only fragmentary records. What contemporary evidence have we that something really significant happened on that day? Perhaps most important of all is Charles Wesley's *Journal* for the evening of May 24, which he had spent praying alone on his sickbed: "Towards ten, my brother was brought in triumph by a troop of our friends, and declared, 'I believe'. We sang the hymn with great joy, and parted with prayer." "The hymn" was probably—not certainly—"Where shall my wond'ring soul begin?"; at least it was one written by Charles upon his own conversion three days earlier.

John Wesley's letters confirm and fill out the picture. The important letter which was apparently written during the daylight hours of that same day is known only from the extract of it which precedes the *Journal* account, and we can only guess at its recipient. Its emphasis upon his quest for faith, however, is found in two letters to William Law, written on May 14 and 20. Indeed he somewhat petulantly blames Law for not having directed him to "seek first a living faith in the blood of Christ". The subsequent correspondence of James Hutton's mother with Wesley's older brother Samuel shows what a bombshell Wesley dropped into that respectable home in

Westminster the following Sunday, May 28, by announcing that before the 24th he had not been a Christian. This is echoed in a letter to his brother Samuel on October 30: "By a Christian I mean one who so believes in Christ as that sin has no more dominion over him; and in this obvious sense of the word I was not a Christian till May the 24th last past." Nor were these words dashed off hastily. The draft of the latter (at Wesley College, Headingley, Leeds), shows many deletions, especially in the following sentence, which was finally amended to read: "For till then sin had the dominion over me, although I fought with it continually; but since then, from that time to this it hath not, such is the free grace of God in Christ."

This statement about not being a Christian until May 24, 1738, was implied in the epilogue to the first published extract from his *Journal*, under date of February 1, 1738, and strangely echoed a year later, *after* Aldersgate, in another spiritual summary prepared during his two hours of morning devotions on January 4, 1739: "My friends affirm I am mad, because I said I was not a Christian a year ago. I affirm I am not a Christian now." This strange assertion is placed alongside what is surely a reference to Aldersgate: "I received such a sense of the forgiveness of my sins as till then I never knew." Here are mysteries enough! The reason for his disavowal of the title "Christian" on this occasion is again an extremely high definition of such a person, as "one who has the fruits of the Spirit of Christ", including love, peace, joy, which Wesley claims he does not experience. In later years he modified these views written down while the pendulum was still swinging wildly from one extreme to the other, and came to agree that even before Aldersgate he was in some measure a Christian and possessed at least the faith of a servant of God, though not that of a son.

Still other evidence confirms the traditional belief that it was the experience of May 24, 1738, that set the spiritual pendulum swinging, albeit somewhat erratically at first. Over seven years later he discussed with a prominent but still anonymous clergyman disguised under the title of "John Smith" (it seems certain that in fact he was not Bishop Secker, in spite of many claims or assumptions to the contrary) the essentials of Methodist preaching, and wrote: "It is true that from May 24, 1738, 'Wherever I was desired to preach, *Salvation by Faith* was my only theme,' (i.e. 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)." Later in the same letter, written in December, 1745, he states that before May 24, 1738, he neither preached

nor *knew* salvation by faith. Actually this assertion is incorrect in one particular, for his *Journal* and other sources show that he began to preach justification by faith on March 6, 1738, some weeks before it became his personal experience. Nevertheless the importance of Aldersgate for Wesley is underlined.

This is confirmed by frequent references back to 1738. One of the best examples occurs in a most important letter to John Newton, written in May, 1765, and dealing with Methodist faith and practice: "I think on Justification just as I have done any time these seven & twenty years: And just as Mr. Calvin does. In this respect I do not differ from him an hair's breadth."

May 24, 1738, was preceded by Wesley's preaching of justification by faith and by his founding (together with Peter Böhler) of a religious society; it was followed by moods of depression and uncertainty. Certainly it is neither a complete break with a dark past nor the first opening of an unclouded future. Yet we cannot but echo the claim of the rationalist historian, W. E. H. Lecky: "It is . . . scarcely an exaggeration to say that 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."

II

We turn briefly to the challenge offered by Aldersgate to the psychologist. The mysterious phenomenon of conversion has furnished one of the favorite subjects of the modern science—or is it an art?—of psychology. Some students have treated the subject all too mechanically, as if man were no more than a collection of impulses governed by his chemistry, and as if to describe a psychological process were to explain it. Others, in increasing numbers, have been more reverent in the presence of mystery and, admitting that there might be something beyond their understanding, have made greater contributions to knowledge. Popular psychology, however, long ago arrived at the conviction that conversion is the stabilizing of emotions around some person or ideal, and normally occurs in adolescence. Any deviation from the norm is suspect, and inevitably pictured against this background as an exception to the rule. This preconception has strangely joined hands with the traditional revivalist idea of conversion to hinder enquirers from approaching any particular conversion with an open mind. Subconsciously we insist that it must conform to the mass-produced fashionable model. This hand-

cuffed approach has prevented even scholars from being as unbiased as they should have been.

John and Charles Wesley both described the experiences which they underwent within three days of each other in May, 1738, as "conversion". What they meant by the term, however, was very different from what many of us assume. Both were certainly far removed from adolescence, Charles being thirty and John thirty-four—a month short of the thirty-five years with which many writers have credited him. Nor were they spectacular sinners being brought to the penitent form, finding spiritual release in an emotional outburst to turn over a new leaf. Both were ordained clergymen, John of twelve years' devout and devoted experience. Both had been sincerely admired by other people as saints. We must find room here for some other definitions of conversion, or possibly throw away the definitions altogether and simply try to understand what happened.

Indeed if we are looking for a conventional moral conversion in the life of John Wesley, we might be better advised to concentrate—as some have done—upon 1725, the year of his ordination at the age of twenty-two after a spiritual awakening under the combined influence of his father, Sally Kirkham, and Thomas à Kempis. The Roman Catholics, represented by the Belgian Father Maximin Piette, would claim this for his conversion, conceived of in terms of a deepened and unified devotion to the pursuit of inward holiness. The Protestants, represented most recently in English by the German professor Martin Schmidt, usually accept as his true conversion the traditional experience of 1738, thought of in Lutheran terms of justification by faith. Must it necessarily be "either/or"? Could it not be "both/and"? So thought the English psychologist, Dr. Sydney Dimond, and others like the American, Dr. Umphrey Lee, have followed him in describing the Aldersgate experience as a "mystical conversion" rather than an "evangelical conversion".

Dr. Dimond's pioneer study, *The Psychology of the Methodist Revival*, uses the terminology of mysticism to describe the stages of Wesley's psychological development. We must surely agree with the rough division of Wesley's life into three periods by the spiritual landmarks of 1725 and 1738. Dimond applies to Wesley the three normal stages of growth in mystical experience, as outlined by Miss Evelyn Underhill, though he finds no parallel to the two final stages reached by exceptional mystics. The five stages are: (1) awakening, "the adolescent of the Infinite"; (2) purgation, by discipline; (3) illumination, or vision; (4) mystic death, or mortification; (5) union, or absorption in the Infinite. Dimond treats 1725 as Wesley's mystical

awakening, 1725-1738 as the period of discipline or purgation, and 1738 as his illumination.

There is much to ponder in this psychological approach, but again questions remain. Was the 1725 awakening the first, or the highest step in an ascending series of awakenings? We would agree that Wesley never attained "union, or absorption in the Infinite"—indeed he strongly repudiated this spiritual amnesia as the rock on which he most nearly wrecked his soul. Yet does not his rejection of all dependence upon any claims to righteousness in his own actions, words, thoughts, and even desires approximate to mortification? Certainly Wesley owed a debt to mysticism, even though he repudiated some of its forms as he saw them in Behmenism, in William Law, and in Moravian "stillness". Nevertheless this approach offers some clues to an understanding of what happened at Aldersgate.

Nor, as Dr. Dimond also points out, must we neglect other apparently non-spiritual factors in assessing Wesley's experience. The emotional stress of his break with Sophy Hopkey may well have been sublimated into a passionate love relationship with God. Certainly he himself later believed that the failure of his eventual marriage heightened the success of his life's work. As sexual sublimation possibly played a part in his conversion, so also with suggestion. We cannot but be impressed by Wesley's constant harping on the theme of his own instinctive dread of the sea and the Moravians' calmness in the midst of storms. This seemed to focus and symbolize the spiritual certainty which they possessed and he lacked, and it was due to their persistent challenges that he pursued this missing sense of security, and eventually believed himself to have attained it. This is by no means an explanation of his conversion, but constitutes at least a minor element in any full explanation. Even the Puritan repressions of his youth may be related to the bursting of the restraints at Aldersgate—his chains fell off, his heart was free!

III

If Aldersgate presents a challenge to the psychologist, it presents an even greater one to the theologian. By what theological terms should we describe this important event? Was it justification, regeneration, Christian assurance, sanctification, a complex blend of all, or something quite different? There is a temptation to simplify the mystery by borrowing the threefold division of his life offered by the psychologist and altering the terminology, thus claiming that until 1725 he was living under sin, from then until 1738 under the

law, and after that under grace. This is a gross over-simplification, yet it holds elements of truth that merit consideration.

Wesley's conversion cannot be understood apart from a rigorous Pauline doctrine of sin rigorously applied. Sin in general was for Wesley "a voluntary transgression of a known law of God." Among the known laws of God, however, one overshadowed all the rest for him in 1738—the fact of original sin, which he saw as such an integral part of human nature that man could do nothing to help himself except ask God's help. The life of a saint is the life of a devil apart from a realization and an acknowledgment of our sinfulness and our impotence. Penitence is the only path to purity. In 1725 Wesley had dedicated himself wholly to God, and sought not only the outward holiness of blameless actions but the inward holiness of blameless motives. Nevertheless in 1738 these years of sincere striving to do the will of God were dismissed as mere legality, which is sin even though it involves no gross sins. Martin Luther trod a similar path.

As Wesley's conception of sin widened, his conception of faith narrowed. Previously faith had comprised for him a belief in a triune God, a trust in divine providence, and a hope of eventual salvation to eternal life. In 1738 it became pinpointed into a faith in the power of Christ, and Christ alone, to wipe out a man's sins and reconcile him to God. Sometimes, as in that triumphant cry at the sickbed of Charles, he used instead the word "belief", but the same narrow definition is implied.

Through the heat haze of the 1738 moment, the aftermath of the warmed heart, Wesley saw all his former pursuit of holiness as pride and sin, his former belief in and dependence upon God as the faith of a devil. Thus the pendulum swung to the far extreme. Eventually he corrected his exaggerations, while continuing to emphasize the importance of the undoubted change. He agreed that before 1738 he did have faith, but it was the faith of a servant rather than that of a son. He agreed that the pursuit of holiness, though possessing no merit in itself, was a normal prelude to regeneration and an essential expression of it, without which the Christian would prove stillborn.

The letters, the sermons, the hymns, in which the two Wesley brothers reveal directly or indirectly their own views of what happened at Aldersgate, suggest that they thought of it as basically an experience of justifying faith: not the justification of arrant sinners who had previously neither possessed nor wanted any faith, but the justification of noble, even saintly, sinners who had come to realize more fully their dependence upon God in Christ. In any case, this

realization, though it might bring no reformation of conduct, did bring regeneration of life.

Wesley's "standard" sermon on "The New Birth" stated that justification and regeneration were inseparable in experience though they should be distinguished in thought. Justification, he said, was "that great work which God does *for us*, in forgiving our sins", and the new birth what "God does *in us*, in renewing our fallen nature." As a child in the womb has eyes and ears but cannot see and hear until it is born, so the "spiritual senses" of a "natural man" are "locked up"; "though he is a living man, he is a dead Christian." After he has been "born again", he is "alive to God through Jesus Christ", and "by a kind of spiritual respiration, the life of God in the soul is sustained; and the child of God grows up, till he comes to the 'full measure of the stature of Christ'."

Whatever their psychological or theological views, all students of the influence of Aldersgate on Wesley agree that something happened to release new spiritual vigor. True, he did not experience those transports of joy that the Moravians had led him to expect. Nor did he clearly recognize in himself other fruits of the Holy Spirit, especially peace of mind. For a time this troubled him greatly, until he learned to ascribe it to the varying operations of God with different individuals. Nor was Wesley free from temptation. Describing this problem of his post-Aldersgate experience he used the law-grace terminology: "I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror." This may appear an over-optimistic statement induced by the afterglow of Aldersgate, but it is in general borne out by the succeeding fifty years of victorious Christian service. Previously he had been beating the air; now his blows hit their target solidly. He endured many hardships as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, and nearly always endured them as one whose eye was constantly on his invisible Captain.

John Wesley is displayed before scholars like a specimen mounted upon a microscope slide, though in revealing the minutiae of his daily activities he frequently manages modestly to conceal himself. What we observe and deduce of the spiritual springs of his conduct, however, constantly enhances his image in our minds; the more we know him the more we respect him. We see human frailty, but unalloyed with self-seeking. We see minor failures caused by over-eagerness or over-trustfulness. Far overshadowing these, however, we see an alert mind and a magnanimous spirit imprisoned in a puny body, but all triumphantly used to the glory of God. Although neither his

doctrines nor his conduct changed much in 1738, his ability to serve God was increased immeasurably. As Pentecost saw the birth of the Christian Church, so Aldersgate saw the birth of the Methodist Church—and more.

An inseparable corollary for the Wesleys of the experience of justification and regeneration was that of Christian assurance—*knowing* that this had happened, rather than *hoping* that it had, or might some day. Clearly this was a very important part of what Wesley, under the influence of Luther and the Moravians, was seeking, witness the description of his spiritual preparation during the weeks immediately preceding 24th May. Convinced that a "true living faith in Christ" was "the free gift of God, and that He would surely bestow it upon every soul who earnestly and perseveringly sought it", he says: "I resolved to seek it unto the end, (1) By absolutely renouncing all dependence, in whole or in part, upon *my own* works or righteousness; upon which I had really grounded my hope of salvation, though I knew it not, from my youth up; (2) by adding to the constant use of all the other means of grace, continual prayer for this very thing, justifying, saving faith, a full reliance on the blood of Christ shed for *me*; a trust in Him, as *my* Christ, as *my* sole justification, sanctification, and redemption." Notice that "me, my, my", and see how they are echoed by his record of the experience itself, combined with an emphasis upon feeling, and upon assurance: "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." This is by no means conversion by feeling, nor does emotion run away with Wesley's mind and will, but those six personal pronouns in that closing sentence, three of them deliberately underlined by Wesley, symbolize the difference between his former striving and hoping and his present accepting and knowing.

This assurance of salvation, of course, he speedily classed as an essential operation of the Holy Spirit in the justified believer—the Spirit bore witness with our spirits that through faith in Christ we were now the adopted sons of God. This personal involvement with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in salvation was of great importance to a staunch trinitarian like Wesley. So important was his emphasis upon the assurance of salvation by the Holy Spirit that this element has sometimes been singled out as the determinative central feature of the Aldersgate experience. Certainly this was the factor that more than anything else drew the abuse of Wesley's contemporaries, summed up in the charge of "enthusiasm", a pretense of being "filled

with God". Even the theologians raised their eyebrows, and occasionally their fists, deploring this evidence of spiritual pride, or confusing an assurance of present salvation with an assurance of eternal salvation, which Wesley denied.

Another corollary for the Wesleys was the necessity of going on from justification to sanctification, the one being the outer gateway to God's presence, the other the inner path. Wesley never claimed to have experienced sanctification or Christian perfection or holiness or (his preferred term) perfect love, but it was always the attainable goal constantly urged upon himself and upon others—"press on to perfection." This, indeed, was as truly a part of his Aldersgate experience as a purpose is part of a deliberate action or the desired holy place a part of a pilgrimage. Lack of spiritual growth, even outstanding spiritual achievement not projected into still further achievement, implied for him a breach of our continually increasing communion with God, a "backsliding". Justification for Wesley meant the power of God transmitted to him for a new beginning which entailed ever new beginnings. As Charles Wesley put it, "for ever beginning what never shall end."

Is it possible to express all that is involved in Wesley's experience in Aldersgate Street in a tight definition, either historical, psychological, or theological, or a combination of all three? I personally doubt it. But perhaps we can, and should, do something more. We can face up to the challenge that Aldersgate offers to us as practicing Christians.

IV

Through two and a quarter centuries John Wesley at Aldersgate speaks to you and me, underlining our own spiritual needs and our own spiritual possibilities. Vividly he realized the dangers of an established church that might value its reputation more than its calling. Towards the end of his life he re-emphasized the point: "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist in either Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they exist only as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power." Has not that very danger stifled the witness of Methodism? Is it not still with us? What can we do about it, you and I? Has Aldersgate any challenge to the sincere but sometimes ineffective Christian of today?

We must realize, of course, that our social and spiritual background is so different from Wesley's that it would be folly to attempt

a detailed reproduction of his experience. We must also realize that we cannot dictate to God, not even by prayerful planning of revival services and Aldersgate commemorations. Nevertheless we can, I believe, do something in the light of what we know of Wesley's experience, something that will at least prepare the soil of our lives and of our churches so that when the Holy Spirit wafts the seeds of revival our way we are the more likely to blossom with the beauty of holiness and bear the fruits of the Spirit to the glory of God.

In this preparation—or so it would seem from the example of John Wesley—there are four main stages. Firstly, we must acknowledge that all our health, physical, mental, and spiritual, comes from God, and that He can give or withhold and yet remain both wise and loving. Just as sickness and suffering play some part in fulfilling His purposes for us, so may our spiritual delays and frustrations. Although our finite minds cannot hope to understand the concealed purposes of all these trials—though of some we may—we can remain assured that He is the kind of God revealed in Jesus Christ, loving us, suffering with us and through us and because of us, and thus saving us. Acknowledging the eternal wisdom of God we must also acknowledge His unceasing love, His unimaginable power—limited only by the laws of His own personality—and the blinding radiance of His purity.

Secondly, we must continue to use diligently all the means whereby Christian experience has shown that the grace of God is mediated to men, keeping ourselves in strict spiritual training and engaging in every possible form of Christian service. But we must not *depend* on these activities, banishing the slightest traces of self-righteousness. We must try to root out from our systems not only the perennial weed of spiritual pride—the Little Jack Horner mentality of "See what a good boy am I!"—but also the creeping crabgrass of a merit theology, an unspoken, unconfessed assumption that God cannot help but save us if we are good enough.

Thirdly, when the sovereignty of God and the impotence of man to put himself right with God are firmly accepted as general truths, and are then vividly realized as particular truths applying to us as individuals, we are ready for the next step—nor are we truly ready before. This also is a two-fold step, first of acknowledgment, then of acceptance: acknowledgment that God has Himself provided a means for making man at one with Him by becoming man in Jesus Christ, and then the acceptance of Christ as "my God", "my Saviour", through that unconditional throwing of ourselves upon God's mercy which we call faith.

When we are thus beaten to our knees before God we can add another petition, that the Holy Spirit will speak to our hearts, assuring us that we are indeed at this moment His children, forgiven by Him for our past sins, freed from the power of sin at the present moment, and promised continually maturing spiritual growth and effectiveness so long as we continue to depend upon Him. We must constantly remember, however, that this is a moment-by-moment assurance, which can be lost as well as found, lost and also re-found. The moment of first finding is one of the most precious in life, a spiritual landmark, as it was for John Wesley. But as it cannot come without an awareness of sinful man's dependence upon a holy God, so it cannot continue to its desired maturity without a constant projection of our whole personalities into the purposes of God.

This is the way of salvation that the Wesleys knew. This is the unwinding ball of string that may lead us through the labyrinthine mysteries of Aldersgate. This is the way to the heaven of perfect love for which Charles Wesley prayed, and for which we also should surely pray:

Finish then Thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see Thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.