

# What Were The Results Of Aldersgate In Wesley's Life And Ministry?

Delbert R. Rose

Three great names are inseparably linked as we traverse the pages of church history. The first is that of a one-time Jewish rabbi, the second that of a Roman Catholic priest, and the third a protestant clergyman. These men are linked together because of the successive spiritual influence of the first upon the second and of the first and second upon the third.

What happened to that Jewish rabbi on the Damascus Road, and to that Roman Catholic priest in his study in the tower of the Augustinian monastery in Wittenburg,<sup>1</sup> and to that Protestant clergyman at Aldersgate was the successive launchings of spiritual forces which have been more revolutionary in our world than what has resulted when earth's most august assemblies have voted or her most powerful armies have marched.

Could you and I stand before the tombstone of John Wesley, just outside City Road Chapel in London, we would read these quaint lines which tell of Wesley's significant place in theology as well as in history:

This great light arose by the singular providence of God to enlighten these nations, and to revive, enforce and defend the pure apostolic doctrines and practices of the primitive Church; which he continued to do by his writings and his labours for more than half a century; and to his inexpressible joy not only beheld their influence extending, and their efficacy witnessed, in the hearts and lives of many thousands, as well in the Western world as in these kingdoms; but also, far above all human power or expectation, lived to see provision made, by the singular grace of God, for their continuance and establishment, to the

---

1. Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1950), pp. 60ff.

joy of future generations. Reader, if thou art constrained to bless the instrument, give God the glory!<sup>2</sup>

In any apparent eulogy of a man during this Aldersgate Observance, let all remember we are but reviewing what God has done through one of His noblest servants and hereby giving God the glory for it all.

### HIS SPIRITUAL ASSURANCE

Aldersgate was a *new beginning* in Wesley's spiritual pilgrimage. For thirteen years previous to this event the young English intellectual had been pursuing holiness of heart and life to the end he might save his own soul. But not until that unforgettable hour on May 24, 1738, could he write lines like these, which show that inseparable linkage between Paul, Luther, and Wesley:

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.<sup>3</sup>

In the words of Charles E. Schofield, "the center of gravity" in Wesley's life shifted "from himself to God." He had experienced a "Copernican revolution" in his "spiritual astronomy." He had moved from a self-centered to a God-centered spiritual universe.<sup>4</sup>

Having tried "every possible humanistic approach to religious certainty and the pursuit of the ideal of Christian perfection," he turned at last to the only door that would open up to him the

- 
2. Franz Hildebrandt, *Christianity According to the Wesleys* (London: The Epworth Press, 1956), p. 9.
  3. John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), I, 475, 476. (Hereafter referred to as *Journal*.)
  4. Charles Edwin Schofield, *Aldersgate and After* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), pp. 14, 15.

realities of Christian assurance and Christian holiness--even Christ Himself.<sup>5</sup> Intellectualism, ritualism, legalism, moralism and mysticism had each failed him, but at Aldersgate the Pauline dictum of "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21) was translated into living experience. Gates of access to God had opened and Wesley had been ushered into the spiritual courts of the Lord.

Did May 24, 1738, end the spiritual struggles of John Wesley? Did Aldersgate immediately produce a fully-assured, "flaming evangelist" who was soon to stir the whole British Isles with his preaching? Let us examine the record.

That very night of his conversion a severe spiritual battle arose within. The Enemy of souls suggested to him, "This cannot be faith; for where is the joy?" Turning to the Lord in earnest prayer he learned his first lesson in "the battle of faith against feeling."

Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to 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.<sup>6</sup>

The Enemy was not content with a single encounter but later that same night severely "buffeted with temptations" the soul of this promising recruit in the Lord's army.

In the school of temptation Wesley soon learned the difference between his pre- and his post-Aldersgate encounters with sin and the Tempter. Said he, "And I herein found the difference between this and my former state...then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror."<sup>7</sup>

Wesley soon discovered two things. First, that he could be "in heaviness through manifold temptations" and yet be pleasing to God and have victory over sin. Secondly, that this victory of faith could not be maintained without ceaseless, believing prayer.

By Monday, May 29, Wesley could witness,

...God hath given some degree of faith even to me,  
I know by its fruits. For I have constant peace; not

---

5. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

6. *Journal*, I, 476.

7. *Ibid.*, I, 477.

one uneasy thought. And I have freedom from sin; not one unholy desire....

.....  
Yet on *Wednesday* did I grieve the Spirit of God, not only by not watching unto prayer, but likewise by speaking with sharpness instead of tender love of one that was not sound in the faith. Immediately God hid his face, and I was troubled...till the next morning, June 1, when it pleased God...to give comfort to my soul...after I had spent some time in prayer....<sup>8</sup>

All seemed to be going exceedingly well with Wesley's soul until the evening of June 6 when he received a letter from Oxford which disturbed him deeply. That letter asserted

'That no doubting could consist with the least degree of true faith; that whoever at any time felt any doubt or fear was not weak in faith, but had no faith at all; and that none hath any faith till the law of the Spirit of life has made him wholly free from the law of sin and death.'<sup>9</sup>

The effects of that letter with its "either/or" precipitated Wesley's rather sudden decision to carry out his longstanding dream of visiting the Moravians in Germany. His need for going at this particular time had become crystal clear.

...I hoped the conversing with those holy men who were themselves living witnesses of the full power of faith, and yet able to bear with those that are weak, would be a means, under God, of so establishing my soul, that I might go on from faith to faith, and 'from strength to strength.'<sup>10</sup>

While with the Moravians at Herrnhut, Wesley learned one of the major emphases of his subsequent ministry. That carpenter-saint, Christian David, laid bare his heart in conversing with Wesley. Mr. David testified that even after being fully justified he found a lingering sin-condition which often stirred within him. Sin, "though it did not reign, it did remain in me," he said, "and I was continually tempted, though not overcome."<sup>11</sup>

---

8. *Ibid.*, I, 481.

9. *Ibid.*, I, 482.

10. *Ibid.*, I, 483.

11. *Ibid.*, II, 30.

Mr. David's analysis helped Wesley discern more clearly and correctly his own experience after Aldersgate. Upon his return to England in mid-September, Wesley was soon at work preaching, but with no great outbursts of spiritual power such as came several months later.

By mid-October another series of spiritual struggles closed in upon Wesley. Following sessions of prolonged self-examination, he concluded that in part he had been created anew in Christ, months before, but not entirely so. The experience of Christian David was his also. He knew his sins of the past were all forgiven, but sin in some sense still remained within, even though it did not reign as it had before.

In a letter to his brother Samuel "as to what he meant by being made a Christian" Wesley wrote:

By a Christian, I mean one who so believes in Christ as that sin hath no more dominion over him; and in this obvious sense of the word I was not a Christian till May 24th last past. For till then sin had the dominion over me, although I fought with it continually; but, surely then from that time to this, it hath not, such is the free grace of God in Christ. . . . If you ask by what means I am made free? I answer, by faith in Christ; but such a sort or degree of faith as I had not till that day. . . . Some measure of this faith, which bringeth salvation or victory over sin, and which implies peace or trust in God through Christ, I now enjoy by His free mercy; though in very word it is in me but as a grain of mustard seed: for the. . . seal of the Spirit, the love of God shed abroad in my heart, and producing joy in the Holy Ghost, 'joy which no man taketh away, joy unspeakable and full of glory, '--this witness of the Spirit I have not; but I patiently wait for it.<sup>12</sup>

Two months after his letter to Samuel, Wesley paints an even darker picture in his journal-entry for December 16, 1738. Let us look at it:

. . . there is in me still the old heart of stone. . . I still

---

12. *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), I, 262ff. (Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.)

hanker after creature-happiness...I have more pleasure in eating and drinking, and in the company of those I love, than I have in God. I have a relish for earthly happiness....Therefore there is in me still the carnal heart...<sup>13</sup>

Obviously Wesley was struggling with that double-mindedness which James tells us makes a man unstable in all his ways (Jas. 1:8).

Wesley's Aldersgate assurance suffered a total eclipse by January 4, 1739. Fresh from an all-night prayer vigil with his Fetter Lane associates on January 1 and 2, Wesley seems to have had an emotional reaction which left him despairing of even being a Christian at all. Although knowing he had received the assurance of forgiveness on May 24, 1738, the like of which he had never known before, yet eight months later he writes: "Though I have constantly used all the means of grace for twenty years, I am not a Christian."<sup>14</sup>

While Wesley had lost the "feeling" that he loved God, he kept right on observing the usual means of grace. Why this very low ebb in his spiritual life? Why this unchristianizing of himself after such heights of joy, assurance and victory as he had had during the months since Aldersgate? Bishop L. R. Marston believes with Tyerman that Wesley had been too much with the Moravians<sup>15</sup> in their emotional and demonstrative services. Perhaps these believers had focused his attention more upon "experiences" than upon his redeeming Lord, which in turn occasioned the casting away of his confidence.

When and where did Wesley surmount the inner defeat of early January 1739? It cannot be pinpointed as can Aldersgate, but that a great deliverance came cannot be seriously questioned. After Aldersgate he had experienced "the unexpected but entirely normal inner struggle between the old mind to sin and the newly implanted mind to righteousness." He desperately needed something that would resolve his inner conflicts and release "his moral and spiritual energies for joyful and effective service."<sup>16</sup>

---

13. *Journal*, II, 115, 116.

14. *Ibid.*, II, 126.

15. Leslie R. Marston, *A Living Witness* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Light and Life Press, 1960), p. 53.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Sometime between January 4 and late March (1739), according to Bishop Marston, John Wesley came to a new level in his Christian experience when his energies were released from "a stressed service" and a fighting of inner battles, and were turned "to tireless, irresistible and successful achievement in evangelism and in organizational generalship."<sup>17</sup>

That change could well have been triggered by George Whitefield's call to Wesley to come to the Bristol area to help in ministering to Whitefield's converts and do "field preaching" himself.<sup>18</sup> As we contrast Wesley's negative outlook of four years earlier--when his dying father entreated him to apply for the Epworth parish that he might *help others*--with his decision to go to Bristol to help Whitefield, we find signs of a new era in his life. In "Oxford, perhaps Georgia and even Fetter Lane," he had been "selfishly introverted" but now his spiritual energies are being "redirected to the task of saving souls other than his own." *At that time* Wesley came, according to Marston, to "his self-commitment to God for unreserved service."<sup>19</sup>

As Wesley left the Fetter Lane group, under their approval and blessing, Charles Wesley comments on John's departure: "A great power was among us. He offered himself willingly to whatsoever the Lord should appoint. The next day he set out, commended by us to the grace of God. He left a blessing behind. I desired to die with him."<sup>20</sup>

Judging from the noteworthy change in the "tempo and melody" of Wesley's life as he began his Bristol ministry, it seems evident to some that he had entered a new stage--had found a new level in his inner life and public ministry. Between Aldersgate and the beginning of his Bristol labors Wesley's ministry was not significantly outstanding, and his inner spiritual life was one of "ups and downs." But now "the record changes abruptly to action, courage, confidence, sermon on sermon of revival power; moodiness and self-analysis are gone; there is no hint now of soul struggle, and soul saving becomes dominant over controversey."<sup>21</sup>

---

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

20. Quoted by Marston, *ibid.*, p. 56.

21. Marston, *ibid.*, pp. 56, 57.

Contrasting this higher plane in Christian service with what he had known Wesley made this journal-entry for Sunday, April 29, 1739, "Oh how God has renewed my strength! who used ten years ago to be so faint and weary with preaching *twice* on one day!" That was his appraisal after having preached five times that day (three times in the fields to approximately 14,000, and two times in church services) and having led a love feast in the evening.<sup>22</sup>

Nearly two months later, victorious and bouyant, Wesley could write to one of his former pupils, Rev. James Hervey, and declare he was then ready (God being his helper) to go to Abyssinia or China, or whithersoever it might please God to call him. Hervey's letter to Wesley had challenged Wesley's principles of action in preaching in others' parishes. His answer pulsates with the very spirit of the Apostles after the Day of Pentecost.

Permit me to speak plainly...I allow no other rule, whether of faith or practice, than the Holy Scriptures; but, on scriptural principles, I do not think it hard to justify whatever I do. God in Scripture commands me, according to my power, to instruct the ignorant, reform the wicked, confirm the virtuous. Man forbids me to do this in another's parish: that is, in effect, to do it at all; seeing I have now no parish of my own, nor probably ever shall. Whom, then, shall I hear, God or man? 'If it be just to obey man rather than God, judge you. A dispensation of the gospel is committed to me; and woe is me if I preach not the gospel.' But where shall I preach it, upon the principles you mention? Why, not in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America; not in any of the Christian parts, at least, of the habitable earth. For all of these are, after a sort, divided into parishes. If it be said, 'Go back, then, to the heathens from whence you came': nay, but neither could I now (on your principles) preach to them; for all the heathens in Georgia belong to the parish either of Savannah or Frederica.

Suffer me now to tell you my principles in this matter. I look upon all the world as my parish; thus far I mean, that, in whatever part of it I am, I judge

---

22. *Journal*, II, 185, 186.



it meet, right, and my bounden duty to declare unto all that are willing to hear the glad tidings of salvation. This is the work which I know God has called me to; and sure I am that His blessing attends it. Great encouragement have I, therefore, to be faithful in fulfilling the work he hath given me to do. His servant I am, and, as such, am employed according to the plain direction of His word: 'As I have opportunity, doing good unto all men.' And His providence clearly concurs with His words, which has disengaged me from all things else that I might singly attend on this very thing, 'and go about doing good.'

...I will put you in mind...the more evil men say of me, for my Lord's sake, the more good will He do by me...Blessed be God, I enjoy the reproach of Christ!<sup>23</sup>

The months that followed for Wesley were filled with "vigorous evangelism" in England and Wales plus doctrinal difficulties with his Moravian associates in London. But the fatiguing labors and tensions did not destroy Wesley's inner constancy and steady faith.<sup>24</sup> Having passed through a "dark night of the soul" so soon after Aldersgate and having emerged with a stronger confidence than before, Wesley became an understanding "physician of the soul" to those enmeshed in spiritual struggles. On March 28, 1740, Wesley reported on a service near Bristol: "I took occasion to describe that wilderness state, that state of doubts, and fears, and strong temptation, which so many go through, though in different degrees, after they have received remission of sins."<sup>25</sup>

The January 4, 1739, entry and one in 1766 have sometimes been used against Wesley's stress upon the doctrine of assurance. Due to illness and other reverses in 1766, a wave of discouragement swept over Wesley's soul. Writing at that time to Charles, he said:

I do not love God. I never did. Therefore I never believed in the Christian sense of the word...If I ever have had *that faith* it would not be so strange. But I never had any other... [evidence or test] of

---

23. *Journal*, II, 217, 218.

24. Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

25. *Journal*, II, 339.

eternal or invisible world than I have now;...I have no direct witness... 26

In commenting on these two utterances of Wesley, Professor Ivan Howard has declared they are in reality "excellent evidence" for his doctrine.

In both instances his lament was that right at the time he did not *feel* the witness of the Spirit. The instances are separated by twenty-seven years and hence indicate that these were the only times when he did not feel the witness of the Spirit...two isolated instances of discouragement cannot be taken as an index to a man's belief when the total expression of his life is in the exact opposite direction. It would seem that while he was grudgingly willing to allow the absence of the witness of the Spirit to others he was scarce able to endure it for a moment himself. 27

While the witness of the Spirit to one's justification by faith is a recognized emphasis of Wesley's according to most scholars, what about the Holy Spirit's witness to one's entire sanctification? Let Wesley himself speak to this:

When you are justified, you had a direct witness that your sins were forgiven: afterward, this witness was frequently intermitted; and yet you did not doubt it. In like manner, you have had a direct witness that you were saved from sin, and this witness is frequently intermitted; and yet even then you do not doubt it. *But I doubt if God withdraws either the one witness or the other without some occasion given on our part* [italics added]. 28

A further insight on the importance of the witness of the Spirit to one's sanctification is found in a letter to one of his preachers in 1768: "If any deny the witness of sanctification,

---

26. *Letters, op. cit.*, V, 16.

27. Ivan Howard, "The Doctrine of Assurance," *Further Insights into Holiness*, ed, Kenneth Geiger (Kansas City, Mo.: Beacon Hill Press, 1963), p. 245.

28. *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), XIII, 48.

and occasion disputing in the select society, let him or her meet therein no more."<sup>29</sup>

Any careful study of the personal life of Wesley always raises the question, "When, if ever, did Wesley himself experience entire sanctification?" Bishop Marston has submitted two lines of rather convincing evidence on this matter. They are: First, the changed mood of his life and the Spirit's manifestations in revival power in his ministry sometime near April 2, 1739. Secondly, near this date he began to make more careful, and subsequently sustained, "doctrinal distinctions concerning two works of grace, a development beginning soon after Aldersgate."<sup>30</sup> Distinctions which had been implicit in his earlier writings and ministry at this juncture became strikingly clarified. His heart's appropriation of divine grace had brought added illumination to his understanding. What he had sighted earlier had now become "truth in the inward parts" of his spiritual being.

It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss the relative merits of alternate views concerning Wesley's personal Pentecost, yet one other dating of the event is worthy of mention. Dr. Olin Curtis, one-time professor of theology at Drew Theological Seminary, took Wesley's words concerning a season with the Lord on December 24, 1744, as the most likely hour of his coming to love God supremely.<sup>31</sup> Dr. George A. Turner's conclusion in *The More Excellent Way* seems to support Curtis' dating of Wesley's experience of entire sanctity.<sup>32</sup>

To conclude this phase of the study, let us listen to Wesley's words directed to Thomas Maxfield on November 1, 1762.

I like your doctrine of Perfection, or pure love; love excluding sin, your insisting that it is merely by faith; that consequently it is instantaneous (though preceded and followed by a gradual work), and that it may be now, at this instant.

I dislike the saying, this was not known or taught among us till two or three years. I grant you did not

29. *Ibid.*, XII, 452.

30. Marston, *op. cit.*, pp. 58, 59.

31. Olin Curtis, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1905), p. 376.

32. George A. Turner, *The More Excellent Way* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Light and Life Press, 1952), p. 171.

know it. You have over and over denied instantaneous sanctification to me; but I have known and taught it (and so has my brother, as our writings show) above these twenty years.<sup>33</sup>

The "above these twenty years" would have thrown the hour of Wesley's knowing entire sanctification very near if not at the time Wesley faced the crisis of taking up field preaching near Bristol, or near April 2, 1739.

### HIS AGGRESSIVE SERVICE

Aldersgate turned John Wesley into what his contemporaries despisingly called an "enthusiast." When those three Oxford graduates, each an ordained clergyman in the Church of England--John and Charles Wesley and George Whitefield--felt compelled to take the Gospel "to the masses in street and field, to the sick and unclean in hovel and gutter, to the wretched and condemned in Bedlam and prison," they were labeled "mad enthusiasts!"<sup>34</sup>

But prison evangelism, field preaching, veritable schools of holiness and soul clinics in the homes of people, opened up amazing channels of service for this Oxford trio. Shortly after Whitefield had begun field preaching on February 17, 1739, he could make this *Journal* record, "I now preach to ten times more people than I should if I had been confined to the churches."<sup>35</sup> He had just preached to 20,000 who had gathered to hear him and that only eight days after starting this new venture.

The "break through" into these irregular and diversified forms of gospel ministry was not easy for John Wesley. When he arrived in Bristol, at Whitefield's urgent call, he was perturbed at Whitefield's

strange way of preaching in the fields...having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order that I should have thought the saving of souls a sin if it had not been done in church.<sup>36</sup>

---

33. *Journal*, IV, 536.

34. Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

35. Quoted by Marston, *ibid.*, p. 69.

36. *Journal*, II, 167.

Strongly traditional, with deep preferences for the orderly, the precise, the ritualistic, John felt an inner compulsion to rise above his temperamental inclinations his ministerial training, his "high-church sentiments" if he were fully to follow Christ. On April 2, 1739, the break was made public. He wrote:

At four in the afternoon, I submitted to be more vile, and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation, speaking from an eminence in a ground adjoining to the city, to about three thousand people.<sup>37</sup>

How significant was that step? Listen to the *Cambridge Modern History's* evaluation of it: It was the beginning of "a new era in the religious history of England."<sup>38</sup> And certainly what happened at the heart of the British Empire would be sooner or later felt around the world.

By this time Wesley had "crashed" each social and intellectual barrier that stratified British society and could preach with equal boldness to a university audience at Oxford or to ignorant miners in the open fields. So fruitful did field preaching become, so honored of God, that Wesley wrote these lines a quarter of a century later: "If ever this is laid aside, I expect the whole work will gradually die away."<sup>39</sup>

Wesley was now in stride with the Apostle Paul. He was willing to become all things to all men that he might by "all means" save some (I Cor. 9:22). After a sermon preached from a tombstone in a churchyard, he said:

How wisely does God order things! Some will not hear even the Word of God out of a church: for the sake of these we are permitted to preach in a church. Others will not hear it in a church: for their sakes

37. *Journal*, II, 172ff. (Wesley had preached in the "open air" on board ship enroute to America and during his ministry in Georgia. "Field preaching" meant more in Wesley's day than "open air" services. It involved matters of "legality and propriety" because of the laws governing the English Church. See *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society*, XI, Part 3. September, 1917, pp. 54-63.)

38. *Cambridge Modern History* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1909), VI, 83.

39. *Journal*, V, 79.

we are often compelled to preach in the highways.<sup>40</sup> Wesley believed that apostolic success was proof of apostolic succession.<sup>41</sup> And he might have added that apostolic success often provokes or necessitates apostolic sacrifice and sufferings. When defending his field-preaching before the critical eyes of the clergy of the Church of England, he declared:

Who is there among you, brethren, that is willing (examine your own hearts) even to save souls from death at this price? Would not you let a thousand souls perish rather than you would be the instrument of rescuing them thus? Can you bear the summer sun to beat upon your naked head? Can you suffer the wintry rain or wind, from whatever quarter it blows?...And yet these are some of the smallest inconveniences which accompany field-preaching. Far beyond all these, are the contradiction of sinners, the scoffs both of the great, vulgar, and small; contempt and reproach of every kind; often more than verbal affronts, stupid, brutal violence, sometimes to the hazard of health, or limbs, or life. Brethren, do you envy us this honour? What, I pray, would buy you to be a field-preacher? Or what, think you, could induce any man of common sense to continue therein one year, unless he had a full conviction in himself that it was the will of God concerning him?<sup>42</sup>

By taking up the role of a "common field preacher," Wesley was making himself "the object of pity of his old friends, and of contempt of the great mass of the churchmen of England." His heightened vision of England's need for evangelization only intensified his zeal to save souls at all costs.

Wesley further amazes us with his prolific writings, ranging over such diversified areas of human need. He averaged writing six volumes per year for fifty-five years, some of which were of the most painstaking kind, such as the translation of the New Testament from the Greek accompanied by his commentary notes on the Scriptures. One dominant passion controlled him in his writings. Clarity of style must be maintained in order that he might truly communicate his message

---

40. *Ibid.*, III, 290.

41. Hildebrandt, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

42. *Works op. cit.*, VIII, 230, 231.

and convictions, and thereby "instruct people of the lowest understanding." The matter of the "communicative arts" was of no small concern to this spiritual prophet of the eighteenth century. He knew the power of the printed page and labored incessantly to make tracts, pamphlets, booklets, and books as well, available to the largest number of people at the most reasonable price. To become affluent through the sale of his books was the farthest from his intention. But convinced that for any people, lay or ministerial, to grow in grace as they should they must be a reading people, he did his utmost to encourage the art and practice of wide and wise reading.<sup>43</sup>

Conservation of converts became a major concern of Wesley as the Revival, begun in 1739, moved on and out over the British Isles and even to the colonies in America. Beginning in London in 1739, he launched the organization of what was known later as the United Societies. A society, said he, is a

company of men having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their salvation.<sup>44</sup>

These "voluntary cells" were "not sponsored or governed by church organization." As need arose the people associated themselves in this informal way to achieve "a more vital spiritual life," just as Wesley and others had done in the Holy Club at Oxford. These societies, subdivided into smaller groups called "classes," gave real opportunity for the true *koinonia* (the fellowship of believers) so readily apparent in the Acts of the Apostles and the New Testament Epistles. Those classes developed "lay leadership," which in turn furnished Wesley with a host of his lay preachers who also helped promote the Revival and conserve their gains in seekers--converts and seekers after that "holiness without which no man shall see the Lord."

With perhaps more books written about this man John Wesley, his life, and/or his works and influence, than any other person of the eighteenth century, you can readily see the impossibility of covering in this short paper anything like the full impact of Aldersgate upon the man and his ministry. Time fails to tell of

---

43. *Letters*, VIII, 247.

44. Quoted by Marston, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

his humanitarian projects, his polemical encounters in defense of historical Christianity combined with his common sense in propagating that faith, his economic and social viewpoints, and his attempts at bringing the Gospel to bear upon the total life of the common man. He indeed was a "friend of man," "a revivalist" first, but also in spirit "a reformer" who believed that transformed men will be concerned about a transformed society.

It was not only what Wesley himself achieved after Aldersgate but what he inspired others to attempt for God and humanity that further accentuates his greatness. That great prison-reformer, John Howard--"one of the greatest men in Europe"--was deeply indebted to the "father of Methodism." After a meeting with Wesley in Dublin in 1878, Howard testified:

I was encouraged by him to go on vigorously with my own designs. I saw in him how much a single man might achieve by zeal and perseverance; and I thought, why may I not do as much in my way as Mr. Wesley has done in his, if I am only as assiduous and persevering? and I determined that I would pursue my work with more alacrity than ever.<sup>45</sup>

The social impact of the revival which Wesley had spear-headed cannot adequately be treated here. But let A. Skevington Wood's research into the "spiritual renewal and advance in the eighteenth century" focalize matters for us.

The relief of the poor, the care of the sick and aged, the feeding of the hungry were all undertaken as the expression of Christian concern. Labour homes were established, schemes of work devised for the unemployed, loan offices and banks opened for the poor and legal advice provided. The curse of the drink traffic was fearlessly attacked and the foundations of the modern temperance movement laid.<sup>46</sup>

The ecumenical concern of Wesley was not among the least of his interests. He had no intention of seeing a rival denomination arise from his labors, but only sought to cross all

---

45. Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, M.A.* (New York: Harper Brothers, Publishers, 1872), III, 485.

46. A. Skevington Wood, *The Inextinguishable Blaze* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1960), p. 246.



denominational or sectarian lines and raise up a people in the already organized bodies of Christendom whose passion would be to experience, exemplify, and exhort others by word and deed to return to "plain, old Bible Christianity."

In conclusion, Wesley was willing that all men give the long-range pragmatic test to his teachings and labors--"By their fruits ye shall know them." In reply to attacks upon his doctrines he was able to point to his fruit in these words:

The habitual drunkard, that was, is now temperate in all things. The whoremonger now flees fornication. He that stole, steals no more, but works with his hands. He that cursed, or swore, perhaps at every sentence, has now learned to serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice unto him with reverence. Those formerly enslaved to various habits of sin, are now brought to uniform habits of holiness. These are demonstrable facts. I can name the men, with their several places of abode.<sup>47</sup>

"Such, in general," says Dr. William R. Cannon, "was the nature of the religious movement of the eighteenth century known as the Wesleyan Revival, or Methodism."<sup>48</sup>

However glowing we may develop the picture of the great religious, social, economic, and political results of Wesley's ministry, we must ever remember, as Dr. Franz Hildebrandt reminds us, that

The quest for holiness remains the great theme of his life, redirected, but not interrupted, by the Aldersgate event, and it springs directly from his reading of the New Testament... [of that] holiness without which no man shall see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14...)<sup>49</sup>

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire  
To work, and speak, and think for Thee;  
Still let me guard the holy fire,  
And still stir up Thy gift in me.

---

47. *Works*, VIII, 402.

48. W. R. Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), p. 26.

49. Hildebrandt, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

Ready for all Thy perfect will,  
My acts of faith and love repeat,  
Till death Thy endless mercies seal,  
And make the sacrifice complete.<sup>50</sup>

---

50. *Methodist Hymn-book* (English) (London: Epworth Press, 1933), No. 386.