

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

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In its truest sense, scholarship is a continuing communal process. As such, I was honored that two colleagues paid my recent essays on Aldersgate the compliment of critical interaction.¹ Among the benefits of such interaction is the identification of those lamentable technical and grammatical mistakes that escape the author's review. For example, John Vickers astutely detected an incorrect page citation in one of my notes.² Likewise, Kenneth Collins identified and rightly criticized an inaccurate quote from one of his works.³

Another benefit of scholarly dialogue is the clarification of claims. In this regard, my response to Vickers (26) is quite minor—admitting that I was using the term “commemorate” to mean some type of *formal* celebration, which may indeed be an anachronistic expectation of eighteenth-century English practice for birthdays. My initial response to Collins' reading of my work is more significant. He repeatedly suggests that my agenda is to eliminate or replace *all* celebrations of Aldersgate (cf. 10, 25). I had hoped that I had made clear that this was *not* my point! What I tried to show in the essay on “Celebrating Wesley” was that the earliest Methodist practice had been to celebrate a *variety* of Wesley events. When the celebration of Aldersgate emerged in the twentieth century, however, it increasingly displaced the other celebrations. It was only this *exclusive* focus on Aldersgate that I criticized (74). My call was for recovered celebration of the various aspects of Wesley's *whole* life and contribution (75), of which Aldersgate would certainly remain one aspect.

There is, of course, a broader issue behind this specific point. Central to Collins' essay is the contrast of two divergent interpretive approaches to Wesley's Aldersgate experience. He cites my work as an example of a

¹My essays at issue are: “Celebrating Wesley—When?” *Methodist History* 29 (1990–1): 63–75; and two essays in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, edited by R. L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood, 1990). The two responses are: John A. Vickers, “Bicentenary Issue: A Response,” *Methodist History* 30 (1991–2): 26–30; and Kenneth J. Collins, “Other Thoughts on Aldersgate: Has the Conversionist Paradigm Collapsed?” *Methodist History* 30 (1991–2): 10–25.

²Vickers, “Bicentenary Issue,” 27. The correct citation for footnote 4 to “Celebrating Wesley” is *The Journal of Charles Wesley, M.A.* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1980) 2:239.

³Cf. Collins, “Other Thoughts,” 10 fn 4. Collins had used the phrase “new wave in Wesley studies.” However, the adjective “dangerous” was mine, characterizing the tone that I detected in Collins' essay. It was inappropriately (and inadvertently) included within the quotation marks.

recent revisionist approach that he wants to contest. This is somewhat ironic given the survey nature of the essays he refers to.⁴ Even so, as I have reflected on Collins' essay I would have to agree that he operates with a somewhat different interpretive approach to Wesley's theology of salvation (and hence to Aldersgate) than the approach to which I have been drawn in my own work on Wesley. One of the strengths of Collins' essay is that he makes his operating assumptions quite clear. This has helped me to gain a better sense of where we appear to differ. Perhaps articulating these apparent differences can contribute to the ongoing dialogue among Wesley scholars.⁵

It would appear that the most central question at issue in our respective interpretive approaches is the importance of temporal development or change in Wesley's theological convictions. To make this question more specific: "To what degree did the 'late Wesley' (1765ff) nuance or modify soteriological convictions that were most distinctive of the 'middle Wesley' (1738–65)?" and "How should we weight any such changes?"

I would suggest that the difference between us on the first of these questions is more one of emphasis than opposition. Collins freely admits that there is much more subtlety and sophistication in the late Wesley than some of the claims of the middle Wesley, but what he finds remarkable is the basic continuity between the two (18). By contrast, while I am also convinced that there is a broad basic consistency between the middle and late Wesley, I am inclined to view the clarifications and nuances of the late Wesley on issues of soteriology as particularly important; for, these developments embody the mature pastoral wisdom of Wesley's reflection on his life and those of his people, and they are fitting expressions of that concern for maintaining the integral relation between God's initiating grace and humanity's resultant (and inescapable) responsibility which is characteristic of the *whole* Wesley.⁶

While this difference of emphasis may not be dramatic, it has important methodological implications concerning the relative weighting of Wesley materials. This can be seen clearly in Collins' requirement that any acceptable interpretation of Wesley's soteriology be established in the theological terminology of the sermons *The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God* and *The Marks of the New Birth* (23). These sermons

⁴For example, on page 23 Collins claims that I contend that Aldersgate is simply the time of Wesley's assurance. However, his reference is to a tradition-history essay where I am summarizing *other* modern interpreters, and where I explicitly refrain from arguing for any particular position, cf. *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, 145.

⁵Since our differences are more over *how* we read certain passages than *which* passages we read, I will not provide extensive references from Wesley. Most of the relevant passages are either quoted or noted in Collins.

⁶Unfortunately, it is not possible to unpack and demonstrate this latter claim in a brief response like this. These issues are central to my forthcoming study, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology*.

are classic expressions of the soteriological convictions of the middle Wesley, both dating from 1748. Thus, Collins' emphasis on continuity allows him to declare the theological expressions of the middle Wesley *normative*, and to read the writings of the late Wesley through their lens. My alternative methodological inclination is *not* to make the writings of the late Wesley normative. Rather, I find most helpful an approach that values the whole Wesley, seeking the insights that emerge from *equal* consideration of both the continuity and changes in his convictions.

The potential danger with making any one period of Wesley's thought normative for reading the other materials is that differences between the periods will be obscured or underplayed. In my judgment, an example of such a result can be found in Collins' analysis of the late Wesley's understanding of the "faith of a servant."

Who is a "servant of God" for Wesley, in soteriological terms? What is clear in both his middle and late writings is that these are folk who are awakened to their sin, fear God, and strive to live righteously, but who lack a confident assurance of their adoption by God through Christ. That is, they do not yet perceive the Spirit's witness with their spirit—that witness of God's love for them which empowers their responsive love for God and for others.⁷

Collins argues (24) that there is one other characteristic of the servant of God that remains consistent through Wesley's thought—they are not yet recipients of God's forgiveness (justification). I must disagree. The middle Wesley does indeed assume this, particularly in the 1746 sermon *The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption*. By contrast, the late Wesley maintains that one who has the faith of a servant is—in a degree—accepted by God. Collins is aware of this, quoting the relevant passage, but seeks to retain continuity with the middle Wesley by arguing that this acceptance is not yet *justifying* acceptance. One might well wonder what "acceptance" would mean, if not justifying acceptance. The crucial point, however, is that the late Wesley stated explicitly that those who are servants of God no longer have the "wrath of God" abiding on them!⁸ What can this mean, but that they are presently justified? To be sure, servants of God still lack the common privilege of Christians—a confident assurance of their adoption, with its empowering effects. Thus the late Wesley continued to exhort them not to stop short of the full witness of the Spirit. However, he did so now without denouncing those who lack such assurance with damnation!

⁷For an extended consideration of how the witness of the Spirit empowers Christian life, see Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, Chapter 5.

⁸Sermon 106, "On Faith," §I.10, *Works* 3:497. Collins quotes from this sermon, but not this passage. In light of this passage, his extended effort to make a strong distinction between 1) those exceptional cases of Christians who are justified but lack assurance and 2) those who are not yet Christian, having only the faith of a servant is less than convincing (19–20).

I would be the first to admit that the late Wesley's understanding of the servant of God appears problematic when judged in terms of the Protestant soteriological principle that adoption, regeneration and justification occur both simultaneously and instantaneously. This is particularly the case if adoption is identified with a conscious experience of assurance—a conviction drawn from the English Moravians that was central to Wesley's transition to his "middle" stage in 1738. On these terms, the late Wesley would appear to be allowing that some folk might be justified who were not yet regenerated! Such a position smacks of classic Pelagianism.

To understand how the late Wesley avoids this charge several points must be made. The best beginning place is to recall the increasing stress that he placed on Prevenient Grace. Wesley understood this grace to effect a *rudimentary* regeneration of the basic human faculties in all persons from the moment of their birth, empowering their initial response to God's overtures for restored right relationship. As such, even the faith of a servant of God is possible only because of the presence of a *degree* of regenerating power of God's grace.⁹

In this very idea of "degrees" of regenerating grace, of course, the mature Wesley was denying that regeneration per se occurs instantaneously. His first move in this regard following 1738 was the hard-won distinction between the initial regeneration of our faculties through the witness of the Spirit and the progressive regeneration of our affections through the course of sanctification. On analogy with this distinction, he came later to admit a rudimentary degree of regeneration (and resultant possibility of saving faith) in the servant of God, while still valuing the *fuller* regenerating power that flows from a conscious assurance of God's love for us.¹⁰

Just as with regeneration, the mature Wesley came to talk of "degrees" of justification. His major motivation in this case was to counteract any antinomian use of justification to undercut responsible growth in grace. This is best seen in his letter to James Hervey (15 October 1756), where he responds to the comment that justification is complete the first moment we believe with the insistence that "there may be as many degrees in the favour as in the image of God."¹¹ On such terms, the idea of a servant of God enjoying the most initial degree of justifying acceptance becomes much more comprehensible.

What we have seen so far might explain *how* the late Wesley would defend the possibility of a servant of God being a beneficiary of God's basic pardoning favor while still lacking the full assurance of adoption,

⁹Note in this regard Wesley's Letter to John Mason (21 November 1776), *Letters* (Telford) 6:239. He argues that no person living is without some preventing grace, "and every degree of grace is a degree of life."

¹⁰Note here his letters to Alexander Knox on 11 July 1778 and 23 December 1779, *Letters* (Telford) 6:315, 364.

¹¹*Letters* (Telford) 3:374.

but *why* did he consider it so important to do so? As he once put it, “a consciousness of pardon cannot be the condition of pardon.”¹² While the mature Wesley always placed a high value on assurance as available for all Christians, he came to see that making the conscious experience of assurance an absolute condition of justification was both psychologically self-defeating and theologically suspect: it made our assurance the prerequisite of God’s forgiveness, rather than God’s forgiveness the foundation of our assurance!

In this clarification of the role of assurance Wesley had come a long way from the model of conversion that had been recommended to him by the English Moravians and had been prominent in his immediate post-Aldersgate materials. This model conjoined justification with full assurance. It was a “twice-born” model of conversion that required Christians to be able to identify a specific time when they *experienced* (literally!) justification.¹³

As Collins ably demonstrated, Wesley nuanced this model in the years following Aldersgate, first allowing that there might be degrees of justifying assurance short of *full* assurance, then allowing that there might be a few exceptional cases (due to bodily disorder or ignorance) where persons are regenerated and exercise justifying faith while lacking conscious assurance. Obviously, with each of these modifications it would become more difficult to assume an exclusive “twice-born” model of conversion, where *all* believers must be able to identify their “experience” of justification.

The limitations of an exclusive “twice-born” model of conversion are even more pronounced for the late Wesley (on our reading), with his valuation of the faith of the servant of God as justifying faith! While Wesley did not believe that all Christians must spend a significant time in a stage of servant faith, he does seem to assume that those who do so are more than a few exceptional cases. Since their justifying acceptance by God was not contemporaneous with a conscious assurance, these folk are much less likely to remember when they “experienced” justification.

¹²Letter to Joseph Benson (21 May 1781), *Letters* (Telford) 7:61.

¹³The language of a “twice-born” model of conversion was popularized by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902). He contrasted the former with a “once-born” model. James’ own discussion of these models intertwined two significantly different comparisons. At times he appears to suggest that the contrast is one between the “sick soul” who needs a significant religious transformation and the “healthy soul” who does not. More often he makes clear that all religious persons have undergone spiritual transformation, and that the difference is between those for whom this transformation was gradual (once-born) and those for whom it involved a dramatic “experience” (twice-born). His basic argument is that these differences are a function of variant personality features and that *both* types of conversion can be effective in producing saintly persons. To make clear that we are rejecting James’ first apparent comparison, we will refer to the “gradualist” model, rather than the “once-born” model.

Actually, it is not real clear in the late Wesley just what event we should date the justification of servants of God from! Most likely it would be their initial penitent responses to God's awakening work in their lives. Such events are much less likely to be dramatically "experienced" than is assurance. And yet, Wesley had come to recognize their vital contribution to the Christian walk of the servant of God.

In this recognition, I believe that Wesley's pastoral sensitivities were leading him to a broader acceptance of the legitimacy of a "gradualist" model of conversion for *some* Christians.¹⁴ In no way did this development lead him (or me!) to impugn the "twice-born" model. The latter clearly remained Wesley's *favored* model, as most expressive of the Christian privilege of assurance. And yet, I believe that the late Wesley no longer considered the "twice-born" model to be *normative*. My sense is that Collins would disagree with me on this point, at least in terms of emphasis.

Let me conclude with some specific reflections on Aldersgate, in light of the preceding discussion. Wesley's initial interpretation of Aldersgate (under the influence of the English Moravians) reflected the assumptions of a normative "twice-born" model of conversion. He judged that he lacked God's justifying acceptance prior to Aldersgate, because he lacked a clear assurance. In the 1774 clarifying footnotes to this initial interpretation I believe that Wesley was gravitating toward a "gradualist" reading of his *own* spiritual journey. He now viewed the transitions in his spiritual life as more incremental in nature, and God's justifying acceptance as present prior to Aldersgate (he was *already* a "servant of God"). What came at Aldersgate was another step in his transforming walk with God—a deeper assurance of his adoption by God and a fuller regeneration of his spiritual faculties.

By contrast, it is my sense that the most central element of the "standard" interpretation of Aldersgate is the requirement of a "twice-born" reading of Wesley's own spiritual journey: 1) the normative model is that persons *conjointly* "experience" some assurance of adoption, the power of regeneration, and the benefit of God's justifying acceptance; 2) the occasion of this "experience" for Wesley was Aldersgate; thus, 3) prior to Aldersgate Wesley was not justified, let alone regenerated. Collins articulately champions such a "standard" reading of Aldersgate (24). As such, it is fitting that he would demand that those who do not identify Aldersgate as Wesley's "conversion" must demonstrate in detail and convincingly when Wesley *did* "experience" justification and regeneration (cf. 23, 25).

¹⁴Note in this regard his Letter to Mary Cooke (30 October 1785), *Letters* (Telford) 7:298. He argues that there is an "irreconcilable variability" in the way the Holy Spirit effects justification, particularly highlighting that it does not always come as a "torrent," but often in a "gentle and almost insensible manner."

Collins suggests that such a task will be impossible. Perhaps by now it will be clear that I agree with him, though for different reasons. In the first place, the demand for an identifiable “experience” of justification is inappropriate if Wesley’s spiritual journey really is more adequately understood in terms of the “gradualist” model. In the second place, the demand for a *conjoined* experience of initial justification and regeneration per se violates the basic point of the late Wesley’s understanding of the faith of a servant, which he now believed characterized his own spiritual journey.

I trust that this exercise in clarification will prove helpful to others in Wesley scholarship, and again thank my colleagues Kenneth Collins and John Vickers for their work which stimulated and contributed to it.