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**INTRODUCTION:
Aldersgate – Signs of a Paradigm Shift?**

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The year 1988 marked the 250th anniversary of the May 24th evening when John Wesley felt his heart “strangely warmed” at a religious society meeting on Aldersgate street in London. This event was commemorated world-wide by the various ecclesial traditions that are descended from Wesley’s subsequent ministry.¹

This anniversary also provoked a flurry of scholarly reflection upon the nature and significance of Aldersgate, both as a component in Wesley’s personal spiritual development and as a normative pattern for his descendants. Among other places, Aldersgate was a focus of discussion at the annual meetings of the Wesley Fellowship (March 1987), the Wesley Studies Section of the American Academy of Religion (November 1987), the Wesleyan Theological Society (November 1988), and the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship (1988). The material from these meetings was later published.² In addition, there were several books released commemorating the anniversary of Aldersgate. Some of these focused specifically on the topic of Aldersgate while others dealt more generally with Wesley and his influence.³

If there is any generalization that can be drawn from these various studies (and the ones included in this volume), it is that there is far from a consensus among Wesley’s contemporary heirs about the significance of Aldersgate, either for his life or as a standard for current “Wesleyans.” Indeed, the present discussion might best be characterized as an “interpretive revolution” concerning Aldersgate. That is, there is a wide-spread dissatisfaction with the current dominant interpretation of Aldersgate and a search for a new interpretation

that is more adequate both for understanding Wesley and for guiding contemporary spirituality.

A Typology of the Current Discussion

Thomas Kuhn's analysis of scientific revolutions suggests an organizing typology for the current interpretive revolution concerning Aldersgate.⁴ Kuhn argues that changes in major interpretive models (paradigms) in the sciences—e.g., the change to a Copernican model of the universe—take place neither instantaneously nor easily. Rather, after a period of time in which a particular paradigm has possessed such dominance that it becomes the norm for all “regular science,” there arises a growing chorus of “nonconformist” voices pointing out the lacunae, distortions, and other inadequacies of the reigning paradigm. The typical response of regular science to such charges is either: 1) to ignore them, 2) to defend the standard paradigm vigorously as it stands, or 3) to propose minor *ad hoc* adjustments to the reigning paradigm, in an attempt to preserve its major claims. If any of these strategies convince the nonconformists, the debate subsides and an interpretive revolution is avoided. But, what happens if regular science cannot answer the critique of the nonconformists? Perhaps the most significant insight of Kuhn is that it takes more than an awareness of the problems of the current paradigm to effect a scientific revolution. There must also be an alternative candidate paradigm that is able to incorporate the central elements of the old paradigm while also successfully explaining those phenomena which the old paradigm could not. Hence, a science may remain in turmoil for some time until such an alternative paradigm emerges. Therefore, the envisioning and testing of such alternatives becomes the major task for furthering the science.

Kuhn's analysis suggests, by analogy, that the various contributions to the current debate concerning Aldersgate can be organized into three basic categories: a) those suggesting problems with the reigning interpretation of Aldersgate, b) those defending the standard interpretation against such charges, and c) those proposing an alternative interpretation of Aldersgate.

Critiques of the “Standard” Interpretation of Aldersgate

Since some of the contributions to the current discussion of Aldersgate take the form of critiques of the “standard” interpretation,

It is necessary first to remind ourselves what that interpretation is. Briefly put, this standard interpretation assumes that Aldersgate was the time of Wesley's *conversion experience*.⁵ That is, it was a specific subjective *experience* by which Wesley was *converted* from a pre-Christian moralist into a true Christian believer. Perhaps the classic example of this interpretation is Thomas Jeffery's biographical study of Wesley's "quest" for a "satisfying religious experience" and the "true gospel of salvation by faith" (Jeffery 1960, 11, 358, 387–89).

The critiques of this currently dominant interpretation of Aldersgate have focused on two levels, corresponding to the two-fold significance of the event: 1) questions about its adequacy for explaining Wesley's own example and understanding of spiritual life, and 2) criticisms of its appropriateness as a contemporary Methodist paradigm for spiritual life.

Critiques of the Interpretation of Aldersgate as Wesley's "Conversion Experience." In the opening salvo of the current debate, Theodore Jennings issued a stringent critique of the "conversionist" reading of Aldersgate (Jennings 1988). Briefly, Jennings argued that the conversionist reading took over uncritically Wesley's own immediate post-Aldersgate interpretation of the event, and ignored the fact that Wesley later qualified or rejected this interpretation (10; cf. Jennings 1988b, 104).⁶ He then gathered together the various aspects of Wesley's biography that appear to conflict with the conversionist reading. Essentially, he claimed that Aldersgate did not make that significant or immediate of a change in Wesley's life. Both before and after Wesley pursued holiness; and, both before and after Wesley struggled with doubt (16). If one must locate a decisive turning point in Wesley's life, it would be in 1725, not 1738 (20). Jennings' real concern is not such a biographical one, however. It is a theological concern. He is persuaded that the conversionist reading of Aldersgate fundamentally distorts Wesley's mature theology of Christian discipleship. It replaces the mature Wesley's emphasis on the "gradual process of God in the soul" with an emphasis on an isolated "moment" of conversion (20); and, it subjectivizes and individualizes piety, at odds with the mature Wesley's "social Christianity" (21).

Michel Weyer reinforced many of these same points in an essay which, if less strident, is more detailed than that of Jennings (Weyer 1988a). Weyer again emphasizes the "retractions" that the later Wesley made to the most conversionist language in the original account of Aldersgate (36). He highlights the evidences for Wesley's spiritual development *prior* to Aldersgate (10ff), and the evidences of Wesley's continuing spiritual struggles *after* Aldersgate (28ff).

As a result, he places Aldersgate *within* the process of Wesley's quest for *holiness* (33), rather than as the *culmination* of his quest for an *experience of forgiveness* (ala Jeffery).

An even milder critic of the biographical adequacy of the standard reading of Aldersgate is John Lawson (1987). Like Jennings and Weyer, Lawson points out the continuities between the pre- and post-Aldersgate Wesley, as a way of rejecting any strong conversionist reading of the event (20ff). His primary concern, however, is to question the legitimacy of an emphasis on the importance of *experience* at Aldersgate, stressing instead the rational basis of Wesley's faith (3). Lawson details Wesley's intellectual activity leading up to and following Aldersgate as a corrective to the standard concentration on Wesley's subjective feelings. For Lawson, Wesley was a rational moralist on both sides of Aldersgate (30).

J. Brian Selleck (1988) provided a unique addition to the criticisms of the reigning conversionist paradigm. This standard understanding of Wesley's spiritual life typically contrasted internal "felt" religion with external religion. As a result, one assumed implication of Aldersgate was Wesley's rejection of his previous liturgical and sacramental spirituality. Selleck provides convincing detail of the role of liturgy and sacrament in the Aldersgate event itself and in Wesley's later spiritual life, as a way of rejecting any reading of the event which is anti-liturgical, anti-church, or anti-sacramental (40).

One further participant who raised significant questions about the adequacy of understanding Aldersgate as Wesley's conversion was John Vickers (1988). Vickers agrees with the others that any satisfactory account of Aldersgate must do justice not only to the change it may have occasioned, but also to the significant continuity in Wesley's life surrounding it. His unique contribution is the reminder that the abstract of Wesley's *Journal* that contained the Aldersgate account was meant to counteract Moravian "stillness." Hence, the major point of the narrative for Wesley must have been its stress on the vital importance of actively searching for faith through all the divinely appointed means, not the character of the "experience," *per se* (10).

Critiques of the Conversionist Reading of Aldersgate as a Paradigm for Contemporary Methodist Spirituality. The first two essays in this volume provide a different focus for evaluating (and rejecting) the standard understanding of Aldersgate. They inquire into the effects of adopting this understanding as the paradigm of contemporary spirituality.

Roberta Bondi argues that the paradigm of spirituality imposed upon contemporary Methodism by the standard interpretation of Aldersgate is inadequate, and even destructive. It does not take seriously enough the complexity of human life or the need for spiritual

disciplines in developing an authentic Christian life. Significantly, she then looks to the mature theology of Wesley and the practice of the early Methodists for an alternative spirituality that is truly life-giving. In essence, the destructive effects of the standard paradigm become evidence for the fact that it could not have been Wesley's own mature understanding.

David Lowes Watson's essay corroborates that of Bondi. He argues that the standard reading of Aldersgate assigns a single religious experience a disproportionate importance, while undervaluing the role of the General Rules, class meetings, and other spiritual disciplines in nurturing and forming Christian life. While Wesley viewed the gift of the inner witness of the Spirit (which he received at Aldersgate) as the *power* of Christian discipleship, he consistently stressed the *form* of disciplined Christian life as the source and nurturer of this power. You cannot have the power without the form. Thus, if contemporary Wesleyans have lost the *power*, it is not because we need to seek more "experiences," but because we have discarded Wesley's spiritual guidelines and disciplines.

A similar critique of the conversionist reading of Aldersgate appears to be implicit in John Newton's and Donald Soper's commemorative lectures given to the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship.⁷ In their analysis of what contemporary Methodists owe the Wesleys there is little stress on the need for a "conversion experience." Rather, they note such characteristics as their sacramental spirituality, their "sung" theology, etc.

Defenses of the "Standard" Interpretation of Aldersgate

Examples of Kuhn's three suggested reactions of the "reigning position" to the "nonconformist" critique are evident in the current discussion of Aldersgate as well.

Ignoring the Criticisms of the Standard Interpretation. Even though questions about the conversionist interpretation of Aldersgate began emerging already during the 225th anniversary celebration in 1963,⁸ some of the 1988 contributions present a conversionist reading of the event with little or no notice of these questions.⁹ Indeed, two of the contributions were simply representations of material given on the 225th anniversary.¹⁰

Vigorous Defense of the Standard Interpretation. Kenneth Collins emerged as the most vigorous defender of the conversionist interpretation of Aldersgate in the recent discussions. He fired an

answering volley to Jennings's opening salvo, decrying the dangerous "new wave in Wesley studies" that questions whether Aldersgate was Wesley's conversion (Collins 1988, 98). He then turned his attention to Albert Outler, whom he views as the source of this "new wave" (Collins 1989a). Finally, he developed an extended defense of the standard interpretation, arguing that it is true to Wesley's own understanding and has been the position of Wesley scholars ever since, until this "new wave" (Collins 1989b). Collins marshals all the standard arguments for the conversionist reading. Unfortunately, he does not respond directly to some of the critics' most important questions about this reading. In particular, he continues to focus on Wesley material that is immediately post-Aldersgate (or, at most, "mid-life") Wesley, scarcely mentioning the later Wesley and the qualifying footnotes in the last edition of the *Journal*.¹¹

Minor Adjustments to the Standard Interpretation. Still other participants in the current discussion have wanted to retain the central claim that Aldersgate was Wesley's conversion while trying to make some modifications in the standard interpretation so that it would not be as vulnerable to charges of emotionalism, subjectivism, or individualism.

A good example is the essay by James Nelson (1988). Nelson assumes throughout his essay that Aldersgate was the time when Wesley was justified and regenerated (i.e., converted). However, he goes to great lengths to "de-subjectivize" the event. In the first place, he argues that when Wesley said he felt his heart "strangely warmed," he meant "warmed by an external or foreign influence." That is, the emphasis was not on the quality of the warming but the identity of the one who warms—God (13–14). Likewise, he argues that the crucial factor which Wesley appropriated from the Moravians, leading to Aldersgate, was their spirituality which emphasized God's radical intrusion into the human situation. This spirituality helped Wesley modify an overly subjective model of conversion inherited from the Puritans.

A similar line of attack can be found in Frances Young (1988), who assumes that Aldersgate was the time of Wesley's "adoption," but spends most of her time arguing that "the emotional element was far less central than the 'myth' has suggested" (39).

Proposals of an Alternative Paradigm

As we noted earlier, a successful interpretive revolution requires more than an awareness of inadequacies in the current standard inter-

pretation. It also requires an alternative interpretation that can be argued to be more adequate than the current standard. Given the twofold significance of Aldersgate, this adequacy would have to be demonstrated both in terms of its ability to enlighten the spiritual/theological development of the “whole Wesley,” and in terms of the implications of the paradigm for contemporary belief and spirituality. One of the remarkable aspects of the recent discussion of Aldersgate is the degree to which there is agreement among those proposing such a new paradigm.

The Place of Aldersgate in Wesley’s Religious and Theological Development. The key to the proposed alternative paradigm of Aldersgate is that the perspective of the *late* or mature Wesley is taken as determinative. There is no better articulation of this reading than the essay by Richard Heitzenrater in this volume (an extensive development of Heitzenrater 1988). For Heitzenrater, as for the mature Wesley, Aldersgate was not the beginning of Wesley’s Christian life but one significant development in his spiritual pilgrimage. In particular, it was the time wherein he received a profound assurance of God’s freely-given love. From this event Wesley would develop a stronger commitment to the gracious nature of salvation and to the witness of the Holy Spirit. And yet, the irony of Aldersgate was that much of Wesley’s immediate interpretation of the event proved to be inadequate. The reality of his subsequent Christian life did not live up to his initial “great expectations.” A crucial reason for this was that he was trying to understand (and experience) a Lutheran theology in the context of his own Anglican and Arminian assumptions. Hence, Wesley’s understanding of Aldersgate underwent significant modification over the course of his life. To recognize this fact does not make the event less significant. It simply suggests that we should learn from the “wisdom” of the whole of Wesley’s experience concerning the event. It also helps explain why Wesley did not harken back to Aldersgate as a model experience to be universalized (cf. 1988, 6).

Very similar accounts of the role of Aldersgate in Wesley’s life and theology were presented by Karl Heinz Voigt (1988) and Michel Weyer (1988b). As Voigt put it, Aldersgate was not Wesley’s conversion, but his “*erfahrung der evangelischen Glaubensgewissheit*” (21).¹²

The Implications of Aldersgate for Contemporary Belief and Spirituality. Several of the discussions of the implications of Aldersgate for contemporary belief and spirituality also consciously adopt the perspective of the mature Wesley rather than that of the immediately post-Aldersgate Wesley. An excellent example is the essay by

Theodore Runyon in this volume. Runyon is sensitive to the criticisms of Aldersgate as Wesley's conversion, but argues that the event was nonetheless theologically significant for Wesley: it crystallized his deeper concern for "experience" in Christian life and theology. Having made this point, however, Runyon quickly adds that Wesley's early post-Aldersgate assumptions about that experience were too heavily influenced by his Moravian contacts. Indeed, the burden of Runyon's essay is to show how the mature Wesley developed a more complex, less subjective, understanding of experience than that first expressed at Aldersgate under the influence of the Moravians! He then proceeds to recommend this refined understanding of the proper role of experience (*orthopathy*) as one of the important contributions Wesley can make to contemporary theology and spirituality.

A parallel type of argument can be found in the several essays on Aldersgate contributed by Methodist scholars in Germany. Manfred Marquardt sets the tone by claiming that the significance of Aldersgate for Wesley and for today is the experience of the certainty of salvation (1988, 49). However, he immediately adds that the mature Wesley saw that such certainty was not guaranteed and did not rule out a legitimate place for temptation and doubts (*anfechtung*) in Christian life.¹³ Likewise, Dieter Sackmann assumes that Aldersgate was the time Wesley received the certainty of salvation (*heilsgewissheit*), but spends the bulk of his time arguing that the mature Wesley had to learn the lesson of Luther that *anfechtung* always accompanies *heilsgewissheit* (1988, 58–62). Similar points can be found in Klaiber 1988 and Weyer 1988.

Summary. What the various proposals for a new understanding of Aldersgate agree upon, in other words, is that it should not be viewed as *the* decisive experience that marked the beginning of Wesley's authentic Christian life. Rather, it was *an* important further step in his spiritual development when his intellectual convictions about God's gracious acceptance were appropriated more deeply at an affectional level. However, it was also an event that Wesley initially read too much into. As such, it is Wesley's *mature reflections* on Aldersgate that should be most significant for those who seek a contemporary expression of "Wesleyan" theology and spirituality.

Gaining Historical Perspective on the Standard Interpretation

The theme of changes in understandings of Aldersgate is central to much of the current discussion. On one level, this theme focuses on changes in Wesley's own understanding of the event, arguing that the

mature Wesley reconsidered many of his early post-Aldersgate claims. On a second level, there is a call for a contemporary change from the current standard interpretation to the new proposed understanding. There is yet a third level at which changes in understandings of Aldersgate need to be considered.

In her contribution to this volume, Jean Miller Schmidt raises the historical question of the origin and longevity of the current standard interpretation of Aldersgate. Her research points out that the current tendency to focus on Aldersgate as the crucial event in Wesley's life is a relatively recent phenomenon, not evident before the twentieth century!¹⁴ Likewise, she argues that a strong conversionist reading of Aldersgate is first found in Luke Tyerman (1870). Thereby, she demonstrates that the current standard interpretation is hardly a self-evident or perennial one. Rather, it is characteristic of a specific historical situation.

The contextuality of readings of Aldersgate is illustrated even more dramatically by Stephen Gunter's essay, which surveys how Aldersgate has been interpreted by one particular branch of the Wesleyan tradition—the holiness denominations. In their attempts to warrant their distinctive emphasis on entire sanctification as a definite second experience of grace, many have claimed Aldersgate to be such an experience! The difference between this interpretation and the standard conversionist interpretation is striking. Even more striking is the related realization that Aldersgate has become a focus for partisan debates within the Wesleyan traditions.

This realization sets the agenda for the Tradition-History of Aldersgate provided by Randy Maddox. The thesis of Maddox's survey is that the variety of opinions concerning the significance of Aldersgate that populate the history of Wesley studies cannot be accounted for simply by the ambiguities in Wesley's references to the event. They are also a function of the shifting theological concerns within the history of the later Wesleyan traditions. The goal of his survey is to provide a greater awareness of the influence of contemporary concerns on interpretations of Aldersgate and, thereby, to nurture a greater hermeneutic sensitivity in the continuing discussion.

Notes for Introduction

1. The most important commemoration took place at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. For a description of this and related events, see *World Parish* 29.4 (1988): 1–7. Further commemorations in London and Tokyo are noted in *World Parish* 30.1 (1989): 4. For a collection of suggested commemorative services for United Methodist congregations, see Yrigoyen, editor 1988.
2. Lawson 1987 was the lecture given to the Wesley Fellowship. Jennings 1988 reproduces relevant sections of the focal essay of the AAR Wesley Studies section. Papers from the WTS 1988 meeting appear in Volume 24 of the *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, including Collins 1989b and Cubie 1989. The two lectures given to the Methodist Sacramental Fellowship were published as: John Newton & Donald Soper, *What I Owe to the Wesleys* (Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, 1988).
3. Those dealing with Aldersgate specifically include Voigt 1988; Wood 1988; and *Im Glauben Gewiss: Die bleibende Bedeutung der Aldersgate-Erfahrung John Wesleys*, edited by the Studiengemeinschaft für Geschichte der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1988). Two more general commemorative volumes were: Donald English, *The Meaning of the Warmed Heart* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1987); and John Stacey, editor, *John Wesley: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Epworth, 1988). One could also note a book by Robert Tuttle that grew out of a lecture given to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Aldersgate: *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).
4. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd enlarged edition (University of Chicago Press, 1970). For the continuing discussion of Kuhn's work, see: Imre Lakatos & Alan Musgrave, eds., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 1970); and Gary Gutting, ed., *Paradigms and Revolutions* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).
5. Note the discussion of the growing dominance of the conversionist reading of Aldersgate in the early twentieth century in the Maddox essay in this volume.
6. It is no accident that Jeffery's account of Wesley's "Religious Quest" ends at Aldersgate! For Jeffery, the quest is over and everything that follows is simply application.
7. Newton and Soper, *What I Owe the Wesleys*.
8. Cf. Baker 1963, Funk 1963, Garrison 1960, Mather 1963, and Snow 1963.
9. Note, for example, how quickly Charles Yrigoyen moves beyond the acknowledgment that "some have disputed whether this 'Aldersgate Experience' of John Wesley may be called his conversion" to defining it as a critical moment in Wesley's spiritual pilgrimage when he attained a "true, living faith" (Yrigoyen 1988, 12). See also McKenna 1988.
10. Edwards 1963a & 1963b are reprinted unrevised in Yrigoyen, editor 1988. The introduction to Wood 1988 makes all the same points as Wood 1963, with no discussion of intervening questions raised about this interpretation.
11. Note his exclusive appeal to the "Standard Sermons" in all three pieces. While this might have some warrant in contexts debating Methodist standards of doctrine, it is a questionable limitation in the enterprise of accounting for the spiritual development of the "whole Wesley."
12. One could also mention Robert Tuttle's reading of Aldersgate (Tuttle, *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition*). He approaches the event in the context of Wesley's interaction with mysticism, but emphasizes the same points: 1) that Wesley's Christian life dates back to at least 1725 (55); 2) that Aldersgate had to do with receiving a sense of

assurance (120); and, 3) that Wesley initially overemphasized the effects of Aldersgate and had to later modify these evaluations (106).

13. See also: Manfred Marquardt, "Gewissheit und Anfechtung bei Martin Luther und John Wesley," *Theologie für die Praxis* 14.1 (1988): 14–28. This theme was particularly relevant to German Methodists because of their ongoing dialogue with the Lutheran tradition and its suspicions about claims for certainty in Christian life.
14. For further information on this issue, see Randy L. Maddox, "Celebrating Wesley – When?" *Methodist History* 29 (1991): 63–75.