

## CELEBRATING WESLEY – WHEN?<sup>1</sup>

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In the wake of the 1988 celebration of the 250th anniversary of Aldersgate, the answer to the question posed in the title of this essay may seem obvious. We celebrate Wesley on the date of his conversion. We always have, beginning with the centennial of that event in 1838.<sup>2</sup> However, this “obvious” answer must be called into question. In the first place, as we shall see, it is historically inaccurate. More importantly, we shall conclude, it is theologically troubling.

### Historical Observations

The question of when to celebrate Wesley and his significance for the Wesleyan Methodist traditions has received a variety of answers, fluctuating with the situation and needs of the movement.

Wesley himself provided no precedent on this issue; except, perhaps, for neglect. He does not appear to have celebrated his own anniversaries. There is no mention of commemorations of his birthday in his published journal or available diaries, though he does use the occasion in his later years to pause and reflect upon his good health and disposition.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, (unlike his brother) he shows no evidence of having commemorated May 24 as the anniversary of his “conversion.”<sup>4</sup>

The first event that could possibly be termed a “celebration” of Wesley by the movement

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<sup>1</sup>The author wishes to acknowledge the stimulus for this project and bibliographical assistance received from Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe. Cf. his presentation at Drew University in May 1988, “Celebrating Aldersgate: Historical Reflections” (unpublished).

<sup>2</sup>The incorrect assumption that the centennial of Aldersgate was celebrated in 1838 has sporadically appeared. It surfaced in editorial comments on the bicentennial of Aldersgate in 1938 (cf. *London Quarterly and Holburn Review* 163 [1938]: 253). The error was quickly pointed out (cf. “Wesley Day, 1938” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 21 [1937–38]: 109–10). Unfortunately, this did not keep it from reappearing in editorials on the 225th anniversary (cf. *Together* 7.1 [1963]: 3) and reflections on the recent 250th anniversary (cf. John Lawson, *The Conversion of the Wesleys* [Derbys, England: Moorley’s Bookshop, 1987], 20). It has even found its way into the recently completed *History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain* (London, Epworth, 1983) 3:43ff.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. John W. Drakeford, “How Growing Old Looks From Within: A Study of John Wesley’s Perception of the Aging Process as Revealed in His Journal’s ‘Birthday Reflections,’” *Journal of Religion and Aging* 1.2 (1984): 39–51.

<sup>4</sup>For Charles’ mention of this practice, see: *The Journal of Charles Wesley, M.A.* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1980) 1:98–99. By contrast, no such mention is present in John’s *Journal* or letters. Indeed, on the 50th anniversary (24 May 1788) his only *Journal* entry is a complaint about the poor quality of a preaching house that had just been built (*The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock [London: Epworth, 1909–16], 7:391–92). There are no references to Aldersgate in extant letters written around this anniversary either.

he spawned is the commemoration of his death in 1791 and the resulting published sermons.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, this was a spontaneous event. The first attempt to plan a commemoration of Wesley was not till May 1824 when several Methodists (who had noted that other traditions had anniversaries and believed that one was needed for their movement as well) held a meeting in London. They hoped that a formal Wesley anniversary would incite gratitude and new dedication to Wesley's revival. They also saw it as an occasion to raise funds for a much-needed building for their missionary program. The event they proposed for commemoration was the centenary of Wesley's ordination to the ministry (19 September 1725). While they were able to get a conference recommendation, their proposal was apparently not widely accepted, for there is no evidence that the celebration was held.<sup>6</sup> A key obstacle was probably the Anglican overtones of the proposed event, this being a time when most Methodists were distancing themselves from their Anglican roots.

The first successful planned commemorative event was in 1839, marking the centennial of the founding of the first Wesleyan Methodist society. Special services were held on October 25, 1839.<sup>7</sup> A centenary history of the movement was commissioned.<sup>8</sup> A special centenary painting and poem were contributed.<sup>9</sup> And, of course, there was a fund drive—to provide for: 1) a theological institution, 2) a building for the Wesleyan Missionary society, 3) a Wesleyan missionary ship, and 4) support for pensioned preachers and spouses.<sup>10</sup>

Notably, the celebration of the centennial of Aldersgate in 1838 does not appear to have been considered as an option to that of the founding

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<sup>5</sup>The most famous are those of Thomas Coke, Henry Moore and John Whitehead. For full bibliographic data on these and others, see Betty M. Jarboe, *John and Charles Wesley: A Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1987), items 363, 835, 1178, 1639, 1839, and 1875.

<sup>6</sup>The recommendation at the 1824 conference can be found in *Minutes of the Methodist's Conferences* (London: J. Kershaw, 1825) 5:522–23. However, there is no mention in the Minutes of the 1825 Conference of any upcoming commemoration, or any other record of the commemoration that I could find.

<sup>7</sup>Several sermons from these services were published. Perhaps the most well known is Thomas Jackson, *Wesleyan Methodism: A Revival of Apostolic Christianity* (London: John Mason, 1839).

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Jackson, *The Centenary of Wesleyan Methodism* (London: John Mason; & New York: T. Mason & G. Lane, 1839). See also: *The Centenary of Methodism: Being a Condensed and Classified History of the Rise, Extension and Continuance of That System Which was founded by Rev. John Wesley, A.M., in the year 1739* (Dublin: Primitive Wesleyanism Methodist Book Room, 1839).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. James Everett, *H. P. Parker's Historical Wesleyan Centenary Picture, Representing the Rescue of the Founder of Methodism, from the Fire of the Parsonage House at Epworth, Including the Family Group in the Foreground* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: John Hernaman, 1839); and, Thomas Martin, *The Centenary: A Commemorative Poem: Including Occasional Sketches of Men and Events in the History of Methodism* (London: John Mason, 1839).

<sup>10</sup>A summary of the planning conference can be found in "Centenary of Wesleyan Methodism," *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 61 (1838): 932–44. The support for the theological institution was controversial, eventuating in the split that formed The Wesleyan Methodist Association.

of the first society, a fact which drew a mild protest from Thomas Jackson.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, there is no evidence that the 150th anniversary of Aldersgate was officially commemorated in 1888.<sup>12</sup> Nor does there appear to have been an annual recognition of May 24 during the nineteenth century. Rather, the debates during this time were over whether it was more fitting to commemorate annually Wesley's birth or his death.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, the next major celebration of Wesley by his various descendants was in 1891 on the centennial of his death. There was again a recommended commemorative service with special worship materials produced.<sup>14</sup> In addition, a centenary biography was produced,<sup>15</sup> a memorial was erected at Epworth,<sup>16</sup> and several related sermons and addresses were published.<sup>17</sup>

A formal celebration of the bicentenary of Wesley's birth was held by the British Methodists in 1903 at Epworth.<sup>18</sup> This event again occasioned several articles and editorials in British journals.<sup>19</sup> For a change, it was also widely observed by Methodists in the United States.

American Methodists had only briefly noted the proposed British celebration of the centennial of Wesley's ordination.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, they were too late in receiving word of the planned British celebration of the founding of the first society to get General Conference approval and promotion of

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<sup>11</sup>"Mr. Wesley's Conversion," *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* 61 (1838): 342–54.

<sup>12</sup>This point is noted, with particular focus on American Methodism, in Jean Miller Schmidt, "'Strangely Warmed': The Place of Aldersgate in the Methodist Canon," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, edited by R. L. Maddox (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1990), 109–19.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. "Anniversary of Wesley's Death," *Methodist Recorder* 5 (March 1865): 68–69.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *Centenary Handbook* (for celebration of the death of John Wesley, 2 March 1891) (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1891); and *The Centenary of the Death of John Wesley, March 2, 1791* (hymns for use at the Centenary Services February 23 to March 8, 1891) (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1891).

<sup>15</sup>Edith Kenyon, *The Centenary Life of Wesley* (London: W. Scott, 1891).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. "Completion of the Epworth Memorial," *Methodist Recorder* 32 (4 June 1891): 426–27.

<sup>17</sup>See especially: *Wesley, The Man, His Teaching and His Work: Being Sermons and Addresses Delivered in City Road Chapel at the Centenary Commemoration of John Wesley's Death* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1891); *The Wesley Memorial Volume; or, Wesley and the Methodist Movement, judged by nearly one hundred and fifty writers living and dead*, Edited by J.O.A. Clark (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1880 [published in anticipation of 1891]); and "The Wesley Centenary," *Review of Reviews* 3 (1891): (London edition) 246; (New York edition) 275–76.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. *Programme of the Celebration of the Bi-centenary of the Birth of John Wesley, at Epworth, on June 17, 1903* (Epworth: Barnes & Breeze, 1903).

<sup>19</sup>See especially: *Wesley Studies, by Various Authors* (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1903), which reproduces a selection of articles that appeared in the *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine* for June 1903 and those contributed to the Bi-centenary number of the *Methodist Recorder* (including an address by Franklin Delano Roosevelt).

<sup>20</sup>"Commemoration of the Centenary of the Late Rev. John Wesley's Ordination to the Office of the Christian Ministry," *Methodist Magazine* (NY) 7 (1824): 455–66 (an account of the planning conference).

a parallel observance. The best that a concerned caucus could do was to persuade the Council of Bishops to proclaim 1839 a Jubilee year and promote hurriedly a smaller scale of the British observance.<sup>21</sup> Overall, these two events occasioned minimal interest compared to their own centennial of the first Methodist society in America, observed in 1866.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the centenary of Wesley's death received scant attention in America.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, a leading journal's only reference to the event was an editorial questioning Wesley's significance for American Methodism.<sup>24</sup>

Partly at work here was the general tendency of American Christians to ignore their roots—due to a millennial sense of being a new, untainted expression of God's will in the new land. One also senses some remaining reaction to Wesley's lack of sympathy for the American revolutionary cause. Against this background, the extent of observance of the bicentennial of Wesley's birth by American Methodists is striking, even if they characteristically focused it on his brief missionary presence in America.<sup>25</sup>

As we move on into the early twentieth century there were two relatively small, but striking, Wesley commemorations. The first was the bicentenary of his first sermon.<sup>26</sup> The second was the bicentenary of his election to an Oxford fellowship.<sup>27</sup> The notable characteristic of these celebrations was the appreciative participation and reclaiming of Wesley by the Anglican tradition.<sup>28</sup>

In hindsight, an even more significant development can be discerned in these early

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<sup>21</sup>Kenneth Rowe has summarized the American actions in "Celebrating Aldersgate," drawing on his investigation of the relevant issues of the *Christian Advocate* (NY).

<sup>22</sup>For an account of the planning of the event, see T. M. Eddy, "The Centenary of American Methodism," *Methodist Quarterly Review* 48 (1866): 165–87. See also Abel Stevens, *The Centenary of American Methodism* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1866).

<sup>23</sup>Besides the material listed above in note 17, the most significant notice was the publication: *John Wesley. Born 1703—Died 1791. Centennial Commemoration of Mr. Wesley's Death March 19th, '91*, ed. by Chicago Methodist Social Union (Chicago: W. J. Jefferson, 1891).

<sup>24</sup>[Mendenhall, J. W.], "Was John Wesley the Founder of American Methodism?" *Methodist Review* (NY) 73 (1891): 618–23. Mendenhall stresses that, while Americans owe their basic theology and polity to Wesley, it was really men who nurtured the movement, like Asbury, that deserve primary honor.

<sup>25</sup>*John Wesley Bi-centennial; People's Temple, Boston, June 29–30, '03 ...*, edited by the John Wesley Bi-centennial Commission, Methodist Episcopal Church Conferences, New England (Boston: Taylor Press, 1903); *Wesley Bi-centennial Celebration by Charleston Methodist Churches, June 24–28, 1903*, (N.p., [1903?]); *Wesley Bi-Centennial, Wesleyan University*, (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University, 1904); and *The Wesley Bi-Centenary Celebration in Savannah, GA. Wesley's Only American Home. June 25–29, 1903*, (Savannah, GA: Savannah Morning News Print, 1903). The Wesleyan University volume includes an address by Woodrow Wilson.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. [H.M.], "Bicentenary of Wesley's First Sermon: Memorable Scene at Southleigh and Open Letter from Whitney," *Methodist Recorder* 66 (22 Oct. 1925): 4–5.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. W. Bardsley Brash, "Great Wesley Celebration at Oxford: Bicentenary of Wesley's Election to a Fellowship," *Methodist Recorder* 67 (1 April 1926): 4; and "Oxford Celebrates Wesley's Student Days," *Christian Century* 43 (1926): 529.

<sup>28</sup>See especially: C. J. Wright, "The Great Itinerant: An Oxford Bi-centenary," *Modern Churchman* 16 (1926): 69–77. Wright argues: "The Church was fortunate in producing such a son in the eighteenth century" (70).

decades of the twentieth century. The subject of Aldersgate and its status in Wesley's life moved to the center of attention.

Early biographies had generally presented Aldersgate as the time of Wesley's "conversion" without entering into detailed analysis of what this implied. In so doing, they were clearly dependent upon the early volumes of Wesley's journal and his own evaluation of Aldersgate at that time.<sup>29</sup> However, Wesley eventually qualified that early evaluation, particularly in relation to his negative judgement about his spiritual state prior to Aldersgate. As such, it was only natural that dissent with under-nuanced conversionist interpretations of Aldersgate emerged.<sup>30</sup>

The alternative to a conversionist reading of Aldersgate was most forcibly presented by two important Catholic studies of Wesley which argued that his conversion should be located around 1724–25 and which emphasized the continuities in his spiritual development thereafter.<sup>31</sup> The general response of Wesley scholars was to defend the importance of Aldersgate, though usually with more appreciation of the continuities before and after the "experience."<sup>32</sup>

The use of the term "experience" suggests an even more crucial aspect of the distinctive reading of Aldersgate that emerged in the early twentieth century. The importance of this event in Wesley's life was increasingly defined in terms of its nature as (a) religious "experience."

Intriguingly, this construal of Aldersgate found expression at both ends of the theological spectrum. Conservative Methodists were influenced by revivalist currents and their "twice-born" psychology which emphasized a dramatic conversion experience. Aldersgate often became for

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<sup>29</sup>On this point see: W. Reginald Ward, "Introduction," *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (hereafter *Works*), 18:1–119 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), esp. pp. 24, 42–43, 94–98.

<sup>30</sup>Perhaps the first such dissent—and rejoinder—took place in the pages of the *Wesleyan Methodist Association Magazine* 17 (1854): 256–70 & 276–86. For a survey of the changing interpretations of Aldersgate in the history of Wesley's descendants, see Randy L. Maddox, "Aldersgate: A Tradition History," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, 133–46.

<sup>31</sup>Augustin Leger, *La Jeunesse de Wesley. L'Angleterre Religieuse et Les Origins du Methodisme au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Libraire Hachette et Cie, 1910); and Maximin Piette, *John Wesley in the Evolution of Protestantism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1937 [French original: 1925]).

<sup>32</sup>For studies that slightly predate Leger, but respond to similar pressures, see: Joseph, W. Bashford, "John Wesley's Conversion," *Methodist Review* 85 (1903): 775–89; and Richard Green, *The Conversion of John Wesley* (London: Francis Griffiths, 1909). For a typical nuanced defense of Aldersgate in response to Leger, see: Joseph Agar Beet, "John Wesley's Conversion," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 8 (1912): 3–6. For more vigorously conversionist responses, see: George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt, 1935), esp. 92; and John D. Lee, "The Conversion-Experience of May 24, 1738 in the Life of John Wesley" (Boston University Ph.D. thesis, 1937). Contrast the general endorsement of Piette in Umphrey Lee, *John Wesley and Modern Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1936), esp. 58–59, 100ff.

them the model of such a conversion.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, liberal Methodist theologians were beginning to take Wesley seriously as a theologian and to relate him to contemporary theological trends. This contemporary theology was heavily influenced by Schleiermacher and his identification of the essence of religion as feelings or affections (*Gefühlen*). Accordingly, Wesley was frequently characterized as a “popularized Schleiermacher” and a forerunner of modern theology.<sup>34</sup> In particular, it was claimed that Wesley epitomized the modern approach of deriving doctrines from experience.<sup>35</sup>

Given the increasing discussion of Aldersgate and its perceived fit with the contemporary interest in experience, it was only a matter of time before Aldersgate received formal observance. The first clear evidence of such observance was the establishment of “Wesley Day” by the London Mission Committee in 1924. This was an annual commemoration of May 24 that focused on the theme of evangelism (conversion). In 1951 it was altered slightly by the World Methodist Council to “Aldersgate Sunday.”<sup>36</sup>

This annual commemoration helped prime the pump for a major celebration of the bicentennial of Aldersgate in 1938. There are three striking features of this event. First, while previously supporters at best, American Methodists now jumped to the forefront of a Wesley commemoration, beginning their plans before the British.<sup>37</sup> Apparently the focus on a universally-available experience instead of a man was more attuned to their egalitarian sensibilities.<sup>38</sup>

The second feature is precisely this focus on experience. The appeal to the significance of experience and the tendency to read Aldersgate as a crisis experience in Wesley’s religious life pervade the literature surrounding this commemoration.<sup>39</sup> As William King epitomized it: “The chief con-

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<sup>33</sup>A good example is H. H. Smith, “BC and AD in John Wesley,” *Methodist Quarterly Review* (Nashville) 79 (1930): 713–15.

<sup>34</sup>See especially Lee, *Wesley and Modern Religion*, 302–303. For a slightly more nuanced comparison, see Cell, *Rediscovery of Wesley*, 46ff.

<sup>35</sup>See especially Sydney Dimond, *The Psychology of the Methodist Revival* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1926), 224; and J. Ernest Rattenbury, *Wesley’s Legacy to the World* (London: Epworth, 1928), 84. For a recent incisive critique of such a claim, see: Mark Horst, “Christian Understanding and the Life of Faith in John Wesley’s Thought” (Yale University Ph.D. thesis, 1985), esp. 285ff.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. “Wesley Day.” *Encyclopedia of World Methodism* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1974), 2:2510–11.

<sup>37</sup>This is noted in *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 21 (1937–38): 109.

<sup>38</sup>This point was explicitly argued on the bi-centenary of Wesley’s death! Cf. B. P. Raymond, “Wesley’s Religious Experience,” *Methodist Review* (NY) 86 (1904): 28–34. Note the related argument that the shift of focus from ecclesiastical development to experience made Anglican participation in the British observance easier in Francis F. Bretherton, “Wesley Day – 1938,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 21 (1938): 144–51.

<sup>39</sup>For particularly striking examples, see: James R. Joy, *John Wesley’s Awakening* (Chicago: Methodist Book Concern, 1937); *London Quarterly and Holburn Review*, Bicentenary Issue, 163 (1938): 168–224, esp. 171, 175, 179, 197, 211, 219; J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys* (London: Epworth, 1938); William T. Watkins, *Out of Aldersgate* (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1937); and *What Happened at Aldersgate?* edited by Elmer T. Clark (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1938), 5, 15, 23, 80.

cern for all Methodists is not that two hundred years ago John Wesley had an experience of the warm heart, but have the Methodists in this good year of our Lord the experience?"<sup>40</sup>

A third notable feature of this commemoration was the participation of Methodist communities beyond Britain and the United States.<sup>41</sup> In fact, it was among these participants that the strongest questions about focusing the meaning of Aldersgate on experience were raised.<sup>42</sup>

Once it was finally provided a formal celebration, Aldersgate proceeded to eliminate most other anniversary celebrations! For example, there was no formal commemoration of the bicentennial of the founding of the first society in 1939.<sup>43</sup> Neither was there an official observance of the 150th anniversary of his death in 1941. In 1944 there was only passing notice of the bicentenary of Wesley's first conference with his preachers.<sup>44</sup>

The celebrations that were not eliminated were redefined by the growing emphasis on Aldersgate. For example, the next significant commemoration after 1938 was in 1953 honoring the 250th anniversary of Wesley's birth. Both British and American Methodists chose to focus this event around the theme of evangelism.<sup>45</sup> By this time, however, evangelism and Aldersgate were nearly equated, resulting in a strong Aldersgate ambience to the overall celebration.<sup>46</sup> Somewhat similar pressures were evident in

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<sup>40</sup>King, "Aldersgate Recurrent," *Christian Advocate* (Nashville) 99 (8 April 1938): 421.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Harry J. Harwood, *John Wesley, Pastor of a World Parish* (Lucknow, India: Lucknow Publishing Co., 1938); John L. Neulsen, *Das Heilserlebnis im Methodismus* (Zürich: Christliches Vereinsbuchhandlung, 1938); Théophile Roux, *La Conversion évangélique de Wesley* (Paris: Dépôt des Publications Méthodistes, 1938); Martin Schmidt, *John Wesleys Bekehrung* (Bremen: Verlagshaus der Methodistenkirche, 1938); and M.O. Williams, Jr., "The Warmed Heart: Aldersgate Then and Now," *Chinese Recorder* 69 (1938): 296–300.

<sup>42</sup>Note especially Martin Schmidt's discussion of how Wesley's later experience relativized the "feeling" side of conversion (*Wesley's Bekehrung*, 64); and Neulsen's insistence that Wesley did not reduce the *heilserlebnis* to "feelings" (*Heilserlebnis*, 15–16).

<sup>43</sup>Notice the note of regret in "Wesley Day, 1938," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 21 (1937–38): 109.

<sup>44</sup>Cf. William Lamplough Doughty, "Bicentenary of the First Methodist Conference: John Wesley's Early Aims and Rules," *Methodist Recorder* 85 (22 June 1944): 3.

<sup>45</sup>Cf. "Observing Wesley's Birthday," *Christian Advocate* 128 (1953): 812. An official study manual prepared for the event was: Gerald Kennedy, *Heritage and Destiny: Wesley Commemorative Volume on the Evangelistic World Mission of Methodism* (New York: Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, 1953)—a notably balanced work.

<sup>46</sup>E.g., Leslie F. Church, "Two Birthdays – and Their Celebration," *London Quarterly and Holburn Review* 178 (1953): 82–84. Church discusses Aldersgate as Wesley's "second birthday" and notes that some are suggesting that the celebration be moved to May 24 as more appropriate to the emphasis on evangelism. See also O. F. Rosinski, "Zum 250. Geburtstag John Wesley—17. Juni 1703," *Deutsches Pfarrerberlat* (1953): 267–68.

the commemoration in 1966 of the bicentennial of the first American Methodist society.<sup>47</sup>

The ascending “Aldersgate paradigm” for assessing Wesley’s importance appears to have reached its zenith with the 225th anniversary in 1963. This anniversary was particularly stressed by American Methodists. They again chose the theme of evangelism, reacting to a decrease in the growth of their churches. As one might expect, many contributions continued to construe Aldersgate as a dramatic conversion experience.<sup>48</sup>

However, this time around, several voices stressing qualifications were raised: Frank Baker carefully detailed the interpretive issues regarding Wesley’s original journal entries and later footnotes concerning Aldersgate, demonstrating that a strong “twice born” reading of the event was untenable; Theophil Funk highlighted Wesley’s continuing spiritual struggles *after* Aldersgate and the crucial role of the nurture of community and the means of grace in Wesley’s mature understanding of Christian life; Gerald Kennedy stressed the importance of Wesley’s prior disciplined life to his attainment of peace; and, Albert Outler used the occasion to stress how Wesley held together learning and piety, countering anti-intellectualistic appropriations of Aldersgate language.<sup>49</sup>

A few contributors were even more critical.<sup>50</sup> Lawrence Snow, drawing on recent hermeneutical studies, argued that Wesley’s descendants have usually read *into* Aldersgate what they wanted to find there; thus, the history of startlingly variant, even opposing, interpretations. He then suggested that the current tendency to construe Aldersgate as a private conversion experience was a drastic misreading. His criterion for making this judgment was that it fits, at best, only materials around 1738 and does

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<sup>47</sup>Cf. W. Maurice King, “Aldersgate—a Beginning.” *Methodist Story* 10.4 (April 1966): 5–6. King argues that the most appropriate way to observe the bicentennial is to give Aldersgate a special significance this year.

<sup>48</sup>Note especially: William M. Arnett, et al., *Aldersgate Heritage* (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, 1964); Harry Denman, “What Aldersgate Means to Me,” *Together* 7.5 (May 1963): 23–24; Maldwyn Edwards, “The Significance of Aldersgate for the Present Day,” *Methodist Recorder* 105 (2 May 1963): 7; Maldwyn Edwards, “Aldersgate and the Three Freedoms,” *Methodist Recorder* 105 (9 May 1963): 4; Ludwig Rott, “John Wesleys Heilserfahrung am 24 Mai 1738.” *Der Evangelist. Sonntagsblatt der Methodistenkirche in Deutschland* 114 (1963): 247–48; G. Ernest Thomas, *Abundant Life Through Aldersgate* (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, 1962); and *Twentieth Century Aldersgate*, (Nashville: Methodist Evangelistic Materials, 1963).

<sup>49</sup>Baker, “Aldersgate 1738–1963: The Challenge of Aldersgate,” *Duke Divinity School Bulletin* 28 (May 1963): 67–80; Funk, “John Wesley nach ‘Aldersgate,’” *Der Evangelist. Sonntagsblatt der Methodistenkirche in Deutschland* 114 (1963): 267; Kennedy, “Aldersgate and 1963,” *Christian Century* 80 (1963): 677–78; and Outler, “Beyond Pietism: Aldersgate in Context,” *Motive* 23 (1963): 12–16.

<sup>50</sup>For an incisive critique of the “Aldersgate Myth” that slightly predated this anniversary, see Webb B. Garrison, “The Myth of Aldersgate,” *Christian Advocate* (Chicago) (12 May 1960): 7–8.



not do justice to the full corpus of Wesley's reflection.<sup>51</sup> Boyd Mather filed a similar charge that American Methodists had imposed a camp-meeting revivalist model upon Wesley's Aldersgate experience and, *it does not fit*. In particular, he argued that the typical expressions of the anniversary evangelism thrust (with their focus on personal religious experience) lacked the very elements that the mature Wesley considered essential to awakening and forming Christian life: *discipline* and *doctrine*.<sup>52</sup>

The questions raised during the 225th anniversary of Aldersgate have received continuing scholarly attention in the years that followed. As a result, a general consensus is emerging on the various issues related to Wesley's relative lack of later references to Aldersgate and his addition of qualifying footnotes to the original journal accounts.<sup>53</sup> In addition, there have been some sophisticated psychological studies of Wesley's *life-long* spiritual development, placing Aldersgate within this context.<sup>54</sup>

The overall impact of this continuing study on the understanding of Aldersgate has been two-fold: First, the emphasis has shifted from the discontinuities to the continuities in Wesley's religious development.<sup>55</sup> Second, the specific impact of the event of Aldersgate is increasingly identified as the reception of a deeper sense of assurance, which empowered him for a life of obedience and ministry. It was not the beginning, but an important strengthening and deepening of Wesley's Christian faith.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>M. Lawrence Snow, "Aldersgate Mythology," *Christian Advocate* 7.21 (20 Oct. 1963): 7–8.

<sup>52</sup>P. Boyd Mather, "John Wesley and Aldersgate 1963," *Christian Century* 80 (1963): 1581–83.

<sup>53</sup>The best discussions of these issues (showing the current range of opinion) are: Frederick Maser, "Rethinking John Wesley's Conversion," *Drew Gateway* 49.2 (1978): 29–53; and Michel Weyer, "Die Bedeutung von 'Aldersgate' in Wesley's Leben und Denken," in *Im Glauben Gewiss: Die bleibende Bedeutung der Aldersgate-Erfahrung John Wesleys*, edited by Studiengemeinschaft für Geschichte der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche (Stuttgart: Christliches Verlagshaus, 1988), 7–39.

<sup>54</sup>Of particular note are: James W. Fowler, "John Wesley's Development in Faith," in *The Future of the Methodist Theological Traditions*, edited by M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 172–92; and Donald M. Joy, "Toward Christian Holiness: John Wesley's Faith Pilgrimage," in *Moral Development Foundations*, edited by D.M. Joy (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1983), 207–32. Also interesting, but more idiosyncratic are: Thorvald Källstad, *John Wesley and the Bible: A Psychological Study*, (Bjärnum, Sweden: Bjärnums Tryckeri, 1974); and Robert Moore, *John Wesley and Authority: A Psychological Perspective*, (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979).

<sup>55</sup>The clearest example of this is Lawrence McIntosh, "John Wesley: Conversion as a Continuum," *Mid-Stream* 8 (1969): 50–65.

<sup>56</sup>The identification of Aldersgate with the gift of assurance or the "witness of the Spirit" was argued forcefully (in explicit contrast with the reigning conversionist interpretation) by Arthur S. Yates, *The Doctrine of Assurance with Special Reference to John Wesley* (London: Epworth, 1952). This identification became increasingly dominant: Cf. Vivian H.H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), 271; Lycurgus Starkey, *The Work of the Holy Spirit: A Study in Wesleyan Theology* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 64; McIntosh, "Conversion," 59; Richard P. Heitzenrater, *John Wesley and the Road to Aldersgate* (Lexington, KY: Kentucky Methodist Heritage Center, 1973), 8; etc.

Neither of these effects necessarily imply a *devaluation* of Aldersgate. However, they do raise questions about any emphasis on Aldersgate that fails to contextualize it adequately within the full scope of Wesley's life and understanding of Christian discipleship. The growing sensitivity to this concern was clearly evident in the 1988 celebration of the 250th anniversary of Aldersgate.

In comparison with the earlier commemorations, the most striking feature of the formal celebrations in 1988 was the degree to which they were more celebrations of Wesley *per se* and the movement he founded than of his "experience" on May 24.<sup>57</sup> This shifted focus was also clear in the commemorative volume issued by Epworth Press.<sup>58</sup>

Intriguingly, the published contributions to the celebration that most obviously continued the previous focus on a conversion experience as the dominant theme for commemorating Aldersgate were directly dependent upon earlier anniversaries.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, the majority of the published contributions stressed the recent growing awareness of the historical, psychological and theological problems with identifying Aldersgate univocally as Wesley's conversion. Indeed, they generally identified the event as his reception of assurance and celebrated the impact of that event upon his life and upon his understanding of the Christian life.<sup>60</sup>

Ironically, even though the 1988 celebration of Aldersgate was less prone than its predecessors to view the event strictly as a conversion experience, it was still the setting of a vigorous debate over the "conversionist" reading of Aldersgate. Theodore Jennings published an incisive

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<sup>57</sup>A good account of the formal service at St. Paul's in London, and of the pilgrimages preceding it can be found in *World Parish* 29.4 (1988). The permanent commemoration was the placing of a statue of Wesley in the Churchyard of St. Paul's (cf. *World Parish* 30.1 [1989]: 4).

<sup>58</sup>*John Wesley: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by John Stacey (London: Epworth, 1988). Only one of the nineteen chapters focuses on Aldersgate and it stresses the need to overcome the many "myths" of the event (Frances Young, "The Significance of John Wesley's Conversion Experience," pp. 37–46).

<sup>59</sup>A good example is: *Celebrating the 250th Anniversary of Aldersgate: Suggestions for Local Congregations*, prepared by the Historical Society and General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church (Madison, NJ: 1988). The main article, "The Significance of Aldersgate for Today" by Maldwyn Edwards (3–10), is a reprint of his two 1963 articles. Note, however, the attempt to broaden the understanding of conversion by adding an article by S. T. Kimbrough on "The Other Aldersgate: The Conversion of Charles Wesley" (11–22). Another reiteration of a 1963 contribution is A. Skevington Wood's introduction to his *Wesley and Luther* (East Sussex, England: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1988).

<sup>60</sup>For a typological discussion of all the 1988 contributions see Randy Maddox, "Aldersgate: Signs of a Paradigm Shift?" in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, 11–19. The most comprehensive and persuasive reading of Aldersgate in terms of "assurance" was Richard P. Heitzenrater, "Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidence of Genuine Christianity," in *ibid.*, 49–91.

critique of such a reading, appealing to the familiar issues of Wesley's later qualifications, continuing spiritual struggles, etc.<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Collins responded with a decrial of the "new wave in Wesley studies" and a defense of the conversionist reading.<sup>62</sup>

In summary, the history of the commemorations of Wesley by his various descendants is one of a move from a variety of events and emphases to a nearly exclusive focus on Aldersgate. Thereby, it also became a history of debates over the precise significance of Aldersgate—for Wesley and for the tradition commemorating him.

### Theological Reflections

If nothing else, the preceding survey has shown that the historical warrant for the present nearly exclusive use of Aldersgate to commemorate Wesley's importance among his descendant traditions is far from obvious. It cannot appeal to either Wesley's precedent or the first century and a half of Methodist practice. Rather, the emergence and growing dominance of this focus were largely a result of twentieth-century cultural understandings and ecclesiastical needs. Obviously, to note the existence of such influences does not automatically demonstrate that the developments are illegitimate. It does, however, raise the issue of theological implications and guidelines.<sup>63</sup>

Recent history has made the implication of an exclusive focus on Aldersgate clear: it isolates some type of religious experience as the crucial contribution of Wesley to Methodism and of Methodism to the Church as a whole. The debates have not been over "experience" *per se*, but over the type of experience. Is it the dramatic experience of conversion, the assuring experience of the witness of the Spirit, the purifying experience of entire sanctification,<sup>64</sup> or something else?

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<sup>61</sup>Theodore W. Jennings Jr., "John Wesley *Against* Aldersgate," *Quarterly Review* 8.3 (1988): 3–22. See also Theodore W. Jennings Jr., "Reply to Kenneth Collins," *Quarterly Review* 8.4 (1988): 100–105. Jennings' target would appear to be the continuing popular effects of the earlier conversionist readings, not the more nuanced current presentations.

<sup>62</sup>Kenneth J. Collins, "The Continuing Significance of Aldersgate: A Response to 'John Wesley *Against* Aldersgate,'" *Quarterly Review* 8.4 (1988): 90–99. See also his related article forthcoming in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 24.1 (1989); and his excursus on "Albert Outler and Aldersgate" in *Wesley on Salvation: A Study in the Standard Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 55–64. While claiming only to summarize the "standard" view of Aldersgate, Collins appears to lack the nuance present in many of the studies he appeals to.

<sup>63</sup>Serious questions must also be raised about the distortions of *spirituality* that emerge from an exclusive Aldersgate emphasis. On this point, see Roberta C. Bondi, "Aldersgate and Patterns of Methodist Spirituality," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, 21–32; and David Lowes Watson, "Aldersgate and the *General Rules*: The Form and the Power of Methodist Discipleship," in *ibid*, 33–47.

<sup>64</sup>The identification of Aldersgate with Wesley's entire sanctification has been a rare position, found usually in the Holiness tradition. An early example is: Carl Eltzholtz, *John Wesley's Conversion and Sanctification* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham; New York: Eaton & Mains, 1908). For a discussion of recent Holiness opinions on this issue, see W. Stephen Gunter, "Aldersgate, the Holiness Movement, and Experiential Religion," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered*, 121–31.

Without denying that an emphasis on experience was *part* of Wesley's heritage, the isolation of this one aspect must surely be rejected. A more balanced perspective is suggested by a purported response of Wesley to the question of what should be done to keep Methodism alive after his death:

Preach our doctrine, inculcate experience, urge practice, enforce discipline. If you preach doctrine alone, the people will be antinomians; if you preach experience only, they will become enthusiasts; if you preach practice only, they will become Pharisees; and if you preach all of these and do not enforce discipline, Methodism will be like a highly cultivated garden without a fence, exposed to the ravages of the wild boar of the forest.<sup>65</sup>

While this quote may be a later amalgam, its components are clearly present in Wesley. In particular, the elements of doctrine, practice (the various means of grace, including works of mercy) and discipline are frequently mentioned as essential to the health of Methodism.<sup>66</sup>

Interestingly, the element of "experience" is typically missing from these lists. This absence should not be taken as suggesting that experience was not important to Wesley. His emphasis on the experience of assurance was clear throughout his ministry, albeit with qualifications in the later years.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, its absence suggests that Wesley saw experience as a *result* of the other elements, not their equivalent, and surely not their alternative.

As such, an *exclusive* focus on Aldersgate (with its corollary focus on experience) would have been troubling to Wesley. This would have been true *particularly* when the focal concern was evangelism and the nurture of Christian life! For, what was most distinctive of Wesley's approach to evangelism was *not* his appeal to experience, but his incorporation of the "awakened" into class meetings—where they were provided the support and the discipline essential to developing Christian character.<sup>68</sup> (It

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<sup>65</sup>Cited in: Franz Hildebrandt, *Christianity According to the Wesleys* (London: Epworth, 1956), 11–12. Hildebrandt takes this from a caption under a picture in Nicolson Square church, Edinburgh. As he notes, there is no corroborating record of this precise quote, but it epitomizes Wesley.

<sup>66</sup>Cf. Sermon 107, "On God's Vineyard," *Works* 3:503–17; and "Thoughts on Methodism," §1, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 13: 258.

<sup>67</sup>Good studies of this issue are: Bernard Holland, "The Conversions of John and Charles Wesley and Their Place in Methodist Tradition," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 38 (1971): 45–53, 65–71; and Yates, *Doctrine of Assurance*.

<sup>68</sup>The importance of the class meeting to Wesley's evangelism has been particularly demonstrated by William W. Dean, "Disciplined Fellowship: The Rise and Decline of Cell Groups in British Methodism" (University of Iowa Ph.D. thesis, 1985), 297ff. See also Wesley's journal entry for 25 August 1763 (*Journal* 5:26).

is probably not accidental that the increase in emphasis on Aldersgate paralleled the growing demise of the class meetings!<sup>69</sup>)

The recognition of this importance of the various cell groups of the society might suggest that we return to the 1839 model of celebrating the founding of the first society rather than Aldersgate. Theoretically, the two need not be exclusive of each other. Practically, their proximity tends to make them so. Thus, the 250th anniversary of the founding of the first society was again swallowed by the 1988 Aldersgate celebration.

Clearly, the celebration of the society has much to recommend it. At the same time, it could easily become simply an ingrown celebration of the movement thus founded rather than a commemoration of the contributions of Wesley to that movement. The structure of the society was one of these contributions. It was not the only one. Wesley also emphasized doctrinal concerns, a special care for the poor, eucharistic worship, etc.

How can we commemorate this *whole Wesley*? The clearest way would be to observe officially either his birth or his death. If there were a theological preference between these two, it might be to celebrate his death, because this would reinforce the need to take into account the wisdom of the *mature* Wesley on the various issues of Christian life and discipleship. Obviously, such a commemoration need not exclude celebrating other aspects of Wesley's life and contribution. Indeed, its observance might provide the larger context that could prevent other observances from consuming their alternatives like Aldersgate has done.<sup>70</sup>

But, what are the prospects? The 200th anniversary of Wesley's death is upon us. There is little evidence of plans to commemorate it. Moreover, the few plans that have been mentioned—mainly in Britain—appear to have been motivated more by monetary hopes (tourism) than theological ones. One wonders when we Methodists will take the character-formative power of a group's public commemorations and rituals more seriously, and exercise more theological concern in choosing and shaping them? Perhaps only when we reclaim Wesley as a theological *mentor*, and are instructed by his model of theology as a "practical discipline."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup>Dean emphasizes the relationship of the growing emphasis on "experience" in the class meetings to their demise!

<sup>70</sup>Some of these observances are again emerging. Witness the (small scale) commemoration of the 250th anniversary of Wesley's turn to open air preaching (Cf. *World Parish* 29.3 [1989]: 6).

<sup>71</sup>On this point, see Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley – Practical Theologian?" *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 122–47