

## JACOB ALBRIGHT: AN EVANGELICAL CONVERSION AND AN EVANGELICAL MINISTRY

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It is difficult to live in central Pennsylvania without discovering the impact that German tile-maker-turned-itinerant-preacher, Jacob Albright, had on that region in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. There are churches named in his honor, colleges and lecture halls dedicated to him, and historical markers identifying where he lived, taught, and died. Albright's legacy lives on in the many denominations worldwide that grew from the denomination he founded, the Evangelical Association. His tireless efforts as an itinerant preacher among German settlers and later as bishop of his denomination made an indelible mark on the lives of thousands in his lifetime. He even died in Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, while on the road serving in ministry. Unfortunately, he did not leave any written records of his experiences or copies of sermons. Yet due to his impact, after his death, many of his followers felt the need to memorialize his life and ministry, along with his remarkable conversion and passion for sharing the gospel, in a number of books.

Albright's life provides a glimpse into the ways in which evangelical religion impacted Germans who lived in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Yet often when the history of evangelicalism has been written about, the emphasis has been upon leaders like Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, and even lesser-known revivalists such as Gilbert Tennent, but Albright and his German evangelical pietists have gotten short shrift.<sup>1</sup>

Why has Albright's story not been more widely told? Several factors may be operative. Some historians of evangelicalism have relied on Reformed sources and have not paid enough attention to Methodist and/or pietistic sources. Some Methodist scholars have not adequately incorporated Albright's story into their own narrative. Furthermore, the story of Albright and German pietism is regional: Albright's greatest impact was felt in southeastern and central Pennsylvania as well as in parts of Maryland and Virgin-

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<sup>1</sup> Theologians Roger Olsen and Christin T. Collins Winn quote Ted Campbell, who provides this definition of pietism: Pietism stressed personal religious experience, especially repentance (the experience of one's own unworthiness before God and one's own need for grace) and sanctification (the experience of personal growth in holiness, involving progress towards complete or perfect fulfillment of God's intention); see *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 2-3. For works on the origins of Pietism see Douglas H. Shantz and Peter C. Erb, *An Introduction to German Pietism: Protestant Renewal at the Dawn of Modern Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2013); and F. Ernest Stoeffer, ed. *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007).

ia. Yet his influence on evangelicals has been felt worldwide.

This article seeks to situate Albright's story within the evangelical narrative. Historians David Bebbington and Alister McGrath have made the case that there are characteristics which evangelicals across theological traditions have in common, such as the belief in the new birth and the Lordship of Christ over the life of the believer. In other words, while evangelicals may not share all of the same theological positions, they generally agree that a person must experience both the new birth (or conversion), and sanctification. When we evaluate the conversion, life, and ministry of Jacob Albright, we find a very evangelical story that fits the descriptions provided by both Bebbington and McGrath. Further, evaluating the ways in which evangelical founding fathers, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, described genuine evangelical conversions and sanctified lives, Albright's story fits neatly within those descriptions as well.<sup>2</sup>

Evaluating Albright's conversion and life in this manner provides a number of insights. First, placing Albright in the evangelical narrative helps to enrich the understanding of evangelicalism beyond Reformed or Methodist perspectives. Second, although the date of his conversion, 1791, lies within the Second Great Awakening, German pietism has rarely been mentioned in discussions of the Second Great Awakening. Most historians connect this Awakening with the emergence of revivals in New England led by theological descendants of Jonathan Edwards in the 1790s, or with the Cane Ridge Revivals in 1801. In addition, nineteenth-century revivalists, such as Charles Finney and English-speaking Methodist itinerants, usually receive a great deal of attention.<sup>3</sup>

Albright's story demonstrates that there were German Reformed as well as Methodist-turned-German-pietist itinerants leading revivals at this time. Finally, and maybe most importantly, by placing Albright's conversion narrative within the evangelical story and comparing it to how Reformed and Methodists leaders understood the new birth, we begin to see the ways in which convertive piety, the belief in the essential nature of the born-again experience, transcended theological boundaries. In turn this enables historians to construct a fuller narrative of a broadly evangelical tradition.<sup>4</sup>

### Albright's Life Before Conversion

Jacob Albright was born to German immigrants from the Palatinate near Pottstown, Pennsylvania on May 1, 1759. It is believed that his family worshiped at a Lutheran church, and some historians contend that he was reared

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<sup>2</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2-14; Alister McGrath, *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 65-68.

<sup>3</sup> John Wolffe, *The Expansion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Wilberforce, More, Chalmers and Finney* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 47-69.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Dayton, "The Limits of Evangelicalism: The Pentecostal Tradition," in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, ed. Donald Dayton and Robert K Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 49; Stanley Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 23-24.

in a pietistic Lutheran tradition that emphasized the new birth. In 1782, Jacob served in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. At age twenty-six, he married Catherine Cope and built a homestead in north-eastern Lancaster County, and the two continued worshiping within the Lutheran church.<sup>5</sup>

Early in his life, Jacob did not experience a religious conversion. He received catechetical instruction as a youth, yet he felt he never fully comprehended the truth of Christianity. According to one of his biographers, he always maintained a reverence for God, but lived a life seeking pleasure; he thought very little about the reasons for human existence or of Christian living. As he grew older, he began to experience pangs of conscience about the condition of his soul, and he attempted to arrest his sinful condition, but the energy to continue never lasted for long. There were other times where he believed his conscience told him that he was unworthy of the grace of God.<sup>6</sup>

Historians are not certain why Albright began having these concerns. It may have had something to do with his childhood religious instruction. If Jacob was raised in a pietist Lutheran church, this would make sense. He admitted that his struggles with conscience often caused him to attend local churches to listen to preachers, and that he did so, in part, because of the instruction he received as a boy, which taught him to have reverence for God and to worship God. Also, he might have been influenced by the many Methodists and United Brethren clergy and lay leaders who lived in his community, e.g., Adam Riegel, a United Brethren lay preacher whom Albright sought out for prayer and counsel.<sup>7</sup> German Reformed preacher and evangelist William Otterbein travelled through his region with fellow evangelist Anthony Houtz. Otterbein was a German Reformed pietist pastor who preached about the new birth and the need for a personal experience and relationship with God. Albright's struggles could have been influenced by his upbringing, but then, his wrestling became greater as he visited churches and heard sermons from evangelical pietistic preachers such as Otterbein.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Sherer Wilson, *Jacob Albright: The Evangelical Pioneer* (Myerstown, PA: Church Center Press of the Evangelical Congregational Church), 9-31. Walker contends that Albright was probably raised in a Muhlenberg Lutheran Church which would have made him more comfortable with pietistic religion. For more detail on Muhlenberg Lutheranism, see Leonard R Riforgiato, *Missionary of Moderation: Henry Melchoir Muhlenberg and the Lutheran Church* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 1980); T. G. Tappert, "The Influence of Pietism in Colonial American Lutheranism," in *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond W. Albright, *A History of the Evangelical Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Evangelical Press, 1956), 21-31.

<sup>7</sup> James O. Bemrdsderfer, *Pietism and Its Influence upon the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Annville, PA: James O. Bemrdsderfer, 1966), 69-73.

<sup>8</sup> Bemrdsderfer, *Pietism and Its Influence*, 32-33, Paul William Milhouse, *Pioneer Pastor to the Germans in America* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Press, 1968), 28-33; A. W. Drury, *The Life of Rev. Philip William Otterbein: Founder of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ* (Dayton, OH: United Brethren Publishing House, 1884), 60-67; Arthur C. Core, "Phillip William Otterbein: Evangelical Pastor, Loyal Churchman, Active Ecumenist," in *Phillip William Otterbein: Pastor Ecumenist*, ed. Arthur C. Core (Dayton, Ohio: The Evangelical United Brethren Church, 1968), 30-36.

Most biographers contend that the preaching he encountered had some impact on his conversion, citing the fact that in 1790, when Albright and his wife lost a number of children to an outbreak of dysentery, he requested Rev. Houtz preside over the funeral services for his children, not a Lutheran clergyman. In addition, this tragedy occurred during a time in his life when he encountered extreme anxiety about the state of his soul.

I was terrified concerning the state of my soul life. The Judgment of God stood out in my imagination. My spirit experienced deep depression which no urge of perceptive faculty could enliven. The feeling of my unworthiness grew daily, until in my 32nd year on a specific day in the month of July it had grown to such a proportion that it bordered on despair. I felt so small and my sins so great that I could no longer comprehend how the righteousness of the just judge who would judge according to the desert and merit could save me from being cast into the bottomless pit of damnation.<sup>9</sup>

Jacob believed that this tragedy struck his family because he was under judgment from God. Therefore, it is possible that this tragedy worked in conjunction with his despair, causing him to seek an evangelical clergyman to preside over the funerals of his children.

### Conversion Story

Jacob's conversion experience follows a pattern similar to those of many early evangelicals. His despair over his sin continued to build until he began praying and confessing all to God. His heart experienced a "lively repentance," and "firm resolve for improvement" came before his soul. He then felt a power within himself to pray to God. As he stated, "I fell to my knees, tears of bitter repentance rolled down my cheeks and a long fervent prayer for grace and forgiveness of my sins ascended to the throne of the most high." He then experienced an illumination and heard the voice which he attributed to the "comforter" in his inner being and realized that it was the work of Christ who completed the work of this salvation. Over time, his soul anxiety abated and he felt that, "joy and peace inbreathed in my breast." He also felt that he could finally accept that he was child of God, due to assurances he experienced in his inner person. In addition, his desires changed: "In place of worldly pleasure came a deep love to God, to his word and to all true children of God."<sup>10</sup>

### How Conversion Story Fits the Evangelical Process

Aside from the role of tragedy in Albright's life, if we place his conversion narrative beside those of John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards and the conversion narratives of other eighteenth-century converts, a number of parallels emerge.

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<sup>9</sup> George Miller, *Jacob Albright* (Dayton, OH: The Historical Society of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, 1959), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Miller, *Jacob Albright*, 3-4; Terry M. Heisey, ed. *Evangelical From the Beginning: A History of the Evangelical Congregational Church* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2006), 26-39.

Like Albright's, Edwards's conversion was something that happened over time. Like Albright, Edwards experienced times of initial change that did not last. As a young man, Edwards went through periods when he was pious and determined to change his ways toward worldly pleasures, only to fall back into old patterns, or, as he referred to his situation, "I returned like a dog to his vomit and went on in ways of sin." Edwards also endured prolonged times of anguish over the state of his soul and about living up to God's righteousness. He experienced fears of damnation while he continued to fall into "old ways of sin."<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in the years before he experienced the new birth, John Wesley desired a deeper relationship with God. He attempted to implement spiritual disciplines as laid out in Thomas á Kempis's, *Imitation of Christ*, with varying degrees of success. In addition, he attended Bible studies and holy communion and participated in service to the poor and prisoners. Wesley even went on a missionary venture which he hoped would save his soul and teach him the true sense of the gospel through preaching it to natives in Georgia.<sup>12</sup>

Jacob Albright attended religious meetings and itinerant preaching to satiate his soul. Edwards also took to religious duties to satisfy the anguish of his soul and seek salvation. Edwards threw himself into reading scripture and attending church services. Attending religious services appears to have played a role in providing Albright with the language and means finally to repent of sin and accept God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ. Edwards had his breakthrough moment while reading 1 Timothy 1:17: "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen." It was in reading this passage that he had an "inward sweet delight in God and divine things." From then on, he encountered "an inward sweet sense of things and "began to have a new kind of apprehensions and ideas of Christ and the work of redemption and glorious way of salvation in him."<sup>13</sup>

Edwards's story sounds similar to what Wesley described when he encountered the new birth:

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>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative in Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 16, *Letters and Personal Writings*, ed. George Clayhorn, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1998), 790-791; George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), 39-45, 50-57, 104-105.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Collins, *A Real Christian: The Life of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 22-23, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Edwards, 792; J. Steven O'Malley, "Co-Laborers in the Harvest: John Wesley and the Evangelicals," *Evangelical Journal* 24.1 (2006): 9-18.

<sup>14</sup> John Wesley, "Journals and Diaries," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 18, eds. R. W. Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), 249-250.

Edwards's and Wesley's descriptions are reminiscent of Albright's realization of God's plan of salvation and the price Christ paid for it, which provided him an inner joy.<sup>15</sup>

Between 1734 and 1735, Edwards's church in Northampton, Connecticut, and a number of towns in New England, experienced a time of revival. Edwards wrote a book entitled, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God*, to tell the story of these revivals. This book was so well received it influenced both George Whitefield and John Wesley to labor for revivals. It also became a manual for revivals used by pastors in America and England.

In this work, Edwards not only told the stories of particular conversions, but like earlier Puritan pastors, he also provided a description of the process many people encountered as they experienced the new birth or conversion experience. A number of the experiences he described match Albright's conversion and even his own conversion.

Edwards's *Faithful Narrative* became so popular that it served as a manual for a number of clergymen who used with it their own congregations to foster revival. In light of this use of Edwards's work, we can look at Albright's conversion narrative from several angles. First, the pastors Albright heard caused him to think about his sinful state in ways that followed Edwards's pattern. Second, the process Edwards provided became such a prominent model that when Albright's followers wrote the narrative of his conversion, they told it in such a manner as to conform to this model. Finally, Edwards might just have provided an accurate account of what many people experienced and Albright followed suit.<sup>16</sup>

The process of conversion begins with what Edwards called the awakening. During this stage, persons become aware of their sinful condition before God, and become concerned about this state, and fear eternal damnation. This stage could begin as a sudden onslaught of anxiety, or through a gradual process. Edwards contends that people often begin to have these feelings after they have heard about someone's experiencing the new birth or hearing about a revival in nearby town.

According to Edwards, it is quite typical for persons in this stage to develop extreme anxiety and dread. To address this anxiety, they would typically attempt to refrain from activities they believe to be sinful; or they would throw themselves in to religious duties, such as attending church services, revivals, reading scripture, meditating, or taking part in the ordinances of the church. It is common for people who begin down this path to lose interest after a period of time and fall back into old patterns. But when anxieties con-

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<sup>15</sup> For a theological treatment of conversion narratives in the Wesleyan tradition, see, Kenneth Collins and John Tyson, eds., *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> David Bebbington, "The Reputation of Edwards Abroad," in *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Stephen J. Stein (New York: Cambridge UP, 2007), 239-240; Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 13-23; Mark Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and Wesley* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 92, 101, 110, 137.

tinue, they once again attempt these activities. Edwards never discouraged anyone from attending to religious duties, because he believed that it was more than likely that when one experienced the new birth, it would be while taking part in religious duties. Albright's conversion narrative demonstrates many of these early signs, including attempting to arrest his own sin and attending religious services as means of satiating his anxiety.

Edwards also discerned that when some people go through times of anxiety over the state of their souls, they also wrestle with God's justice and their inability to match up to God's righteousness. They feel unworthy of God's salvation, due to their sin. During such anxious times, people fear God's anger or believe that God is judging them for past sins. Albright's conversion followed this pattern. He lamented about his unworthiness, and he believed that God was judging him when his children died. It is common for people to think they are experiencing God's wrath and judgement after a tragedy such as Albright's, but in his case it appears that this tragedy took place while he was going through what Edwards referred to as the awakening.

Based on his experience, Edwards contends that it is while hearing a sermon, reading scripture, meditating on scripture, praying, reflecting on God's offer of salvation, or attending a religious service that many people break out of their anxiety and feel the peace of conversion. Albright's breakthrough resulted through many of these. According to Edwards, the new birth provides persons with assurance and power to accept God's salvation and mercy, as they encounter the comfort of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. It is at this point that people would realize that their salvation is based on Christ's work on the cross and not in their deeds.<sup>17</sup>

After the new birth, a converted person hears sermons or reads scripture as if for the first time. Lessons they have heard hundreds of times before or passages they have read many times, take on a brand new meaning and relevance. In addition, after the new birth, people would often spend time meditating on the scripture and developing a new-found love for it. Albright's narrative fits these patterns as well. He remarked how he had attended church for years and had been catechized, but he did not really understand the truth of Christianity until he experienced the new birth.<sup>18</sup>

In both his works, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God* and *Religious Affections*, Edwards makes the case that people who have experienced the new birth gradually develop a new love for God and their fellow man. Their aspirations and wills are gradually altered, so that they begin to desire the things of God and lose interest in sinful activities. Incrementally, the glory of God becomes the motivating factor governing their lives. In addition, those who encounter the new birth develop an extreme concern for the spiritual states of people they love, their neighbors, and even enemies.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of Surprising Work of God*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 4, The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972), 148-190.

<sup>18</sup> Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative*, 27-32.

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 2, Religious Affections*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale UP, 1966), *passim*.

Like Edwards, John Wesley writes extensively about conversion and the new birth, spelling out what he believes are the marks of an authentic new birth in his book *The Marks of the New Birth*. First, experiencing the new birth means having a faith in God that transcends a speculative or notional faith. Rather, it is a disposition of heart that God implants which brings forth a trust and confidence that the merits of Christ have forgiven and reconciled a person to God. It's an absolute rejection in "confidence in the flesh." Second, in the experience of new birth, and through the power of the gospel and the Holy Spirit, an individual gains victory over sin and doubt. Wesley opposes the notion that after the new birth, an individual would continue to struggle with sin and doubt as much as before the new birth. Wesley believes that God's children should—and could—have victory in these areas. Third, an individual experiences peace between the self and God. Fourth, the new birth should provide the convert with the Comforter (the Holy Spirit), who bears witness to the convert's spirit that they are a child of God. Fifth, and most important to Wesley, the person who experiences the new birth should have a new found love for God and their neighbor. This love for God and neighbor should impact every decision a person makes. Wesley was adamant that the proof of love for God was obedience to God's laws.<sup>20</sup>

Here Wesley's meaning is quite clear. He had been baptized in the church, taken the sacraments, studied theology, served in the church for many years, served as a missionary, and was quite fastidious in keeping rules. Yet he knew that during that entire time he had not truly experienced what it meant to be an authentic Christian, because he had not experienced the new birth. At best he was what he referred to as an "almost Christian." His law-keeping was merely an outward service. The obedience God sought was a love of God's law and God's will. That is, the love of believers should constrain them to obey God and seek God's will. Not that Albright was a perfect Christian by any stretch, but if we were sitting with a check list called Wesley's Signs That a Person Experienced the New Birth and then read Albright's narrative, we could check off all the boxes—particularly when we evaluate Albright's ministry to his German neighbors.<sup>21</sup>

Even though they came from different theological traditions, Wesley and Edwards had very similar views on what a changed life ought to look like. Wesley emphasized a love of God and neighbor that was radically different from anything an unconverted person could understand. The new birth was to constrain a person to obey God. Edwards taught that the believer should

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<sup>20</sup> John Wesley and Thomas Oden, *The Marks of the New Birth* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), *passim*; see: John Wesley, "The New Birth," in *The Works of John Wesley, Volume 2, Sermons 34-70*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 186-201. To understand how Wesley defined the "Almost Christian," see: John Wesley, "The Marks of the New Birth," in *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 1, Sermons 1-33*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 417-430.

<sup>21</sup> To understand how Wesley defined the "Almost Christian," see: John Wesley, "The Almost Christian," in *The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 1, Sermons 1-33*, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 131-141.

always seek the glory of God. Wesley and Edwards were both pointing to the same issue; i.e., the Lordship of Christ over the life of a believer. Both contended that persons who experienced the new birth no longer lived for themselves. The converts' affections and will were to be transformed to such an extent that their outlooks on life were radically different. They are no longer lords of their own lives. Christ was to be the lord of their hearts, and to give them direction and strength to follow God's law and seek God's will where ever it led.

Yet both men emphasized that this change of heart was not a matter of will power, rather it was a work of the Holy Spirit. Wesley stated, "They [the convert] now walk after the Spirit both in their hearts and in their lives. They are taught by the Holy Spirit to love God and their neighbor with a love which is springing up to everlasting life. By the Holy Spirit they are led into every holy desire. They are led into every divine and heavenly temper, until every thought arises in their heart is holiness to God."<sup>22</sup> Edwards stated:

Christian love to both God and men is wrought in the heart by the same work of the Spirit. There are not two works of the Spirit of God, one to infuse a spirit of love to God and another a spirit of love to men. But in doing one he doth the other. The Spirit of God in the work of conversion renews the heart by giving it a divine temper. *Ephesians 4:23*, "And be renewed in the spirit of your mind." And it is the same divine temper which is wrought in the heart that flows out in love both to God and men.<sup>23</sup>

For Wesley and Edwards, both conversion and sanctification are due to the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, leading humanity to love God and submit to God's will and to love their neighbor as themselves. Albright describes his own conversion and change in this way:

. . . . I continued ever thereafter fervently to pray for the grace of God and the constant help of his spirit that he would grant me strength to fight against (the sinful desires) and to ultimately give me victory . . . . Through this persistent striving I was finally privileged to tear myself away completely from the way of the flesh and give thought and attention only to that which is above.<sup>24</sup>

It appears that Albright and his biographer might have been using some hyperbole, but this quotation demonstrates how Albright's views about conversion are very similar to those of Edwards and Wesley. Albright's commitment to ministry further demonstrates how radically his life was altered, due to his conversion experience.

### Life after Conversion

After his conversion, Albright strove to love God and his neighbor as himself and sought God's will above his own. This does not mean that he

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<sup>22</sup> John Wesley, "The First Fruits of the Spirit," in *Sermons on Several Occasions, Vol. 1* (New York: George Lane, 1840), 69.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Love the Sum of all Virtue," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Ethical Writings*, Vol. 8, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989), 133.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, 3-4.

was a perfect Christian. He had failings and doubts like everyone else. He admitted that he grew in grace and the strength of his commitments. In fact, some might even question his decision to leave his family for long stretches of time to be an itinerant preacher. But it appears from all accounts that, just as Edwards had observed, some people who experienced the new birth developed a burden to share the gospel with others, Albright developed such a burden for his fellow Germans.

To grow in faith after conversion, Albright began to have fellowship with Methodists. He chose Methodists because he believed that their teachings most aligned with his own beliefs. He joined a class led by Isaac Davis, but a great deal of what was discussed was lost on him, since the classes were in English—not his primary language. He tried to learn the language as best as he could. Despite this difficulty, Albright was able to become acquainted with the *Book of Discipline* and took on more and more speaking opportunities in meetings.<sup>25</sup>

No doubt due in part to his own difficulties, about five years after his conversion a concern for the spiritual states of his German brethren began to nag Albright. He believed that the state of religion had fallen into disrepute among them, and that many like him had great difficulty learning about evangelical religion in their own language. The burden sent him to his knees to pray for them, that God would lead all his German brethren into the knowledge of God and bring them all to an understanding of truth.<sup>26</sup>

In many ways, Albright's concern for the German people was similar to that of Wesley, when he was called to ministry and stated that the world was his parish. Both men were driven by a love of and a concern for humanity. Wesley had articulated that love for God and neighbor were the hallmarks of a true conversion experience. Albright felt God calling him to do something about the situation his German brethren were facing, but he wrestled with his decision:

So I prayed daily and prevailed in prayer for my brethren. While I so communed with God, suddenly it dawned on my soul and at the same time I heard a voice of my heart saying, "Did this just happen, was it a mere coincidence, that the degenerate condition of your erring brethren should so deeply impress you? . . . What if this eternal love which desires to lead every soul into Abraham's bosom should have chosen you to show your brethren the way into the knowledge of God and to prepare them for the acceptance of the mercy of God?"<sup>27</sup>

Albright vacillated between times when he would answer these questions in the affirmative, and times when "carnal nature raised many a protest, so often that I was irresolute." The more he tried to talk himself out of doing something about the spiritual condition of local Germans, the more the bur-

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<sup>25</sup> Miller, 4; Albright, 36; Kenneth Rowe, "Jacob Albright and the Evangelical Association," in *Methodist and Pietist: Retrieving the Evangelical United Brethren Tradition*, ed. J. Steven O'Malley and Jason E. Vickers (Nashville: Kingswood, 2011), 37.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, 5-6; John B. Warman, "Francis Asbury and Jacob Albright," *Methodist History* 16.2 (January, 1978): 75-81.

<sup>27</sup> Miller, 6.

den for them troubled his soul. It was during this time of wrestling, that he encountered a period of sickness: pain throughout his body, weight loss, and physical weakness, to the point that he was unable to work. This bodily illness was exacerbated by an anxiety that he had forsaken God by not responding to this call. In this condition, Albright cried out to God for clarity. He said that God showed him that humanity can do nothing better than submit fully and obediently to God's will. He finally decided to answer the call and become an itinerant preacher among Germans. Albright learned through this struggle what Wesley and Edwards described as fruit of the new birth, allowing God to be the lord of one's heart wherever it might lead.<sup>28</sup>

Albright's conversion and call to ministry follow many of the same patterns as those of contemporary and fellow Methodist itinerant preacher, Francis Asbury, who came to faith due in part to a tragedy and then devoted his life to itinerant ministry. Both men answered the inner voice to dedicate their lives to God, but where Asbury traversed a larger geographic region than Albright, Albright was able to reach people that were out of reach to Asbury due to language and cultural barriers. Like Asbury, Albright dedicated himself to a life of itinerant ministry that included denying himself all comforts and consecrate his body for service.<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, to begin with, I fasted for weeks at a time. As a result, my body became feverish and burning to such degree that I had to bath in cold water, to cool off the fever that raged within. In general, I did everything possible, within my power to deaden the mortal desires, to put under flesh, in order that it should not conquer over the spirit of Christ in me.<sup>30</sup>

This response can sound strange, as if Albright was attempting to remove sin from his life through a severe course of ascetic activities. Possibly. Yet it seems more likely that he was preparing himself for life as an itinerant Methodist preacher. John Wesley reviled the consumeristic revolution that had taken over England and America, and he taught against accumulating excessive wealth or spending on extravagant luxuries. He admonished those who would not detach themselves from worldly pleasures. Wesley held Methodist itinerants to a higher standard.

Preachers such as Asbury who adhered to Wesley's economic teachings, lived a life that modeled Wesley's views. According to Methodist historian, John Wigger, Wesley had high expectations for his preachers, and many failed to measure up to his standards. Wesley opposed accumulating excess wealth; this influenced people such as Asbury to give away most of his wealth. Asbury also lived by Wesley's instructions never to eat more than needed, sleep more than needed, or talk more than needed. He devoted his life to saving souls, the primary role of an itinerant. Itinerants were expected to suffer for the Christ by traveling to share the gospel. Wesley also expected his preachers to devote themselves to cultivating their spirituality

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<sup>28</sup> Miller, 7

<sup>29</sup> Warman, 75-80.

<sup>30</sup> Miller, 8.

through disciplined reading, meditation, prayer, and self-denial. Further, being an itinerant meant traveling in all conditions to reach people. Wesley taught his itinerants never to be financially irresponsible. This could explain why Albright bounced between his ministry and returning home to produce goods that provided for his family and his ministry. It also explains why he employed young itinerants and members of his church so they too could be financially solvent. It appears from what we know about the lives of early Methodist itinerants, and the ways in which Albright prepared himself, that he answered his call with his eyes wide open to the trials and tribulations he would face.<sup>31</sup>

Albright spent his life traveling through Pennsylvania, preaching the new birth and evangelical religion among German settlers in private homes, barns, churches, schools, and outdoor venues. He described his initial success this way:

I began my travels in 1796 in the month of October to obey the call of God in proclaiming his holy will as revealed in the gospel. I travelled extensively in Pennsylvania and Virginia and through the blessings of God I found opportunity to preach in churches, schoolhouses and private homes. I also received some support so that I was enabled to continue my travels; for my labors in the gospel were not without fruit as many persons were awakened and converted to God.<sup>32</sup>

Albright was said to be a passionate speaker. Within four years, he gathered a following of German converts. It was common for his campmeeting-style services to have shouting, fainting, and stamping in rhythm. He attempted to stir a moderate course, even though for many Lutherans and German Reformed clergy, his movement was fanatical. This concern about fanaticism actually helped Albright's movement to grow. He drew a following which grew larger as more and more people were thrown out of their denominations for consorting with an alleged fanatical religion.

As his movement grew, Albright organized converts into classes throughout central Pennsylvania, following the Methodist pattern. He also trained young men for itinerant ministry, enabling him to increase the circuit area. By 1803, Albright's movement had grown to the point that they decided to form their own church. In November of 1803, the "Albright People," as they were called, met, and he was ordained by his followers as a preacher of the gospel. Historians mark this as the founding of the Evangelical Association, a name the group would not adopt until 1816. The "Albright People" had wanted to join the Methodist Church but were turned down since they used the German language exclusively.<sup>33</sup>

Albright continued his tireless efforts to preach to as many German-speaking people as he could. His hard labors began to take a toll on his body. He developed what some believed to be tuberculosis, but he would not let that

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<sup>31</sup> John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 39-40.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, 8-9.

<sup>33</sup> O'Malley, 39-40.

daunt his efforts.

Throughout 1808, Albright continued his work for his newly-formed church, teaching the gospel. In May of 1808, he was returning to his home in Lancaster when some of his companions realized he would not be able to make it home. When he reached Kleinfeltersville, Pennsylvania, about twenty miles from his home, he agreed to stop and rest at the home of George Becker. Jacob Albright died the next day on May 18, 1808, at the age of forty-nine. Historians of his movement contend that he preached himself to death. Despite his premature death, his movement would live on and give birth to a number of additional denominations, under leadership of many of the people he trained for ministry.<sup>34</sup>

Due to Jacob Albright's efforts, thousands of German speaking people heard about evangelical religion and the new birth in their own language in places that many of the major figures in evangelicalism were unable to reach.

## **Conclusion**

This article has made the case that when we include the evangelical German pietist tradition in the evangelical narrative, a more complete story emerges. Evangelical German pietists such as Jacob Albright, although divided by language from fellow evangelicals, were in unity with them over the need for the new birth and Lordship of Christ over the lives of those who experienced the new birth. His conversion narrative and life after conversion resemble a very evangelical pattern laid out by two of the founding fathers of evangelicalism, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley. Historians should pay greater attention to the history of evangelical German pietism. Evangelicalism encompasses much more than merely Reformed and Methodist narratives. Evangelical narratives often include German pietistic influences only when the Moravians are discussed. But the German pietist tradition developed in new ways in the late eighteenth century, as Albright's life depicts. In the end, including Albright's story in the evangelical narrative provides a far broader and richer understanding of evangelicalism.

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<sup>34</sup> R. Yeakel, *Jacob Albright and his Co-Laborers* (Cleveland, OH: Publishing House of the Evangelical Association, 1883), 116-120.