JOHN WESLEY, INQUIRER SEEKING GRACE:
THE MORAVIAN VIEW

SANDRA GERLACH

In the tiny room behind the altar of Old (Moravian) Chapel in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, hangs a portrait of Moravian convert-missionary Peter Boehler, smiling, open-faced, and hearty, who is credited with bringing John Wesley “to a full awakening.”1 Since Wesley prepared for publication the second volume of his journal in July, 1740, much has been written by critics about Wesley’s Aldersgate experience of May 24, 1738, but not about the event which preceded it on April 23, 1738. It was a spiritual experience at least as important as Aldersgate, but only recorded in complete form by Boehler in his handwritten *London Diary*, February 18, 1738, to May 28, 1738.2 The transcribed version I read in German in the London Moravian Archives was easier to read than the original eighteenth century manuscript written in German script located at the Unitat Archiv in Herrnhut, Germany. Only fragments of the *London Diary* appeared in Martin Schmidt’s well-known work on Wesley.3 I have translated into English Boehler’s *London Diary* covering the period from February 18 to April 23, 1738, and the two weeks following May 24, 1738. This may be the first such complete translation.4 Significantly, this spiritual high point which Boehler witnessed is not found...
in Wesley’s *Journal I* under April 23, 1738. When Wesley mentioned this spiritual experience, it was only to refer to parts of it. In effect, he concealed it as the twelfth of eighteen points under May 24, 1738. Wesley informed the reader that these points are an interpretation of events leading up to what occurred at Aldersgate.

Although Wesley admitted in the entry of April 23, 1738, that Boehler and his witnesses ended his disputing about instantaneous faith, it is important to note that he also admitted to unbelief. Wesley wrote: “On Sunday the 23rd I was beat out of this retreat too, by the concurring evidence of several witnesses, who testified to what God had thus wrought in themselves; giving them in a moment such a faith in the blood of his Son as translated them out of darkness into light, out of sin and fear into holiness and happiness. Here ended my disputing. I could only cry out, Lord, help thou my unbelief.” Some scholars question whether Wesley can be taken at his word, whether he ever ended his disputing and experienced conversion. Noted Methodist scholar Albert Outler and Moravian bishop La Trobe are among them, as well as long-time friend of Wesley and English Moravian convert, James Hutton.

Even the entry for April 23, 1738, in Wesley’s *Diaries*, more private than the *Journals*, gives no hint of its actual importance:

At 4:45, prayed, meditated. 6, at St. Ann’s, read prayers, preached, sacrament. 9, Mrs. West’s, tea, religious talk. 10, Wapping, read prayers, preached. 12:30, Mr. Parker’s, prayers, dinner, religious talk. 2:30, St. Helen’s, read prayers, preached. 4:45, at home; Boehler, etc. convinced that faith converts at once. 6, tea; sang (t). 7, religious talk to Boehler, prayer. 7:30, Mrs. Hutton’s: sang, prayed. 9, religious talk with Metcalf. 9:30, prayed. 10:30, at home.

Without access to an English translation of Boehler’s *Diary*, English critics such as the Rev. J. E. Rattenbury left out what occurred on April 23, 1738, since they used only Wesley’s *Journal* as their source. In light of Boehler’s *Diary*, one could question Rattenbury’s hypothesis that Aldersgate could best be described as Wesley’s evangelical conversion, while March 2, 1738, is designated as his Protestant conversion. When the text of Boehler’s *Diary* is carefully considered, it indicates that there probably was no conversion at all on March 2, 1738. Wesley’s attempted conversion of March 2, 1738, was apparently even less conclusive than that of April 23, 1738. Aldersgate, which will be discussed later in this essay, came to be considered the core of Methodist spiritual experience. Almost all the critics followed Wesley’s lead in the very area he may have been the least reliable. Wesley was acting to benefit his movement with characteristic single-mindedness. Yet it is important to take into account that the near legend of Aldersgate has diverted

---

5 All references are to the *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley, Journals and Diaries I* (1735-1738) vol. 18, edited by W. R. Ward and R. P. Heitzenrater (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1988) Volume 18 will be referred to in this article simply as Wesley’s *Journal*.

attention from the April 23, 1738, event which we will refer to from now on for convenience sake as “Betstundegate.”

Although Martin Schmidt undoubtedly had access to the complete untranslated German version of the Diary, he studied Wesley during the 1960s principally with a view of Wesley’s affinity to Luther rather than how he was influenced by Moravians Spangenberg and Boehler. This is problematic since Luther was one of the few theologians Wesley never published in his abstracts of A Christian Library except for a brief biography. Wesley was also against Luther’s doctrine of consubstantiation. Although it was Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans that Wesley heard read at Aldersgate, it was common practice to use readings from the great reformer’s commentaries in conversion accounts in order to lend credibility to their experiences. Schmidt fails to consider Betstundegate on its own merit by seeing it merely as a “foretaste of his actual conversion on May 24, 1738,” which is of course Wesley’s position.

Evangelical conversion experiences are often held to be suspect in principle because they cannot easily be measured or proved. A mid-nineteenth century study by William Law’s biographer, Christopher Walton, who was introduced to Law’s writings through Wesley’s A Christian Library, suggests that John’s conversion preceded his brother’s. This would predate it to April or at least before May 21, the date Charles gave for his conversion in his Journal. This is not what John would have us believe. Although there is no secondary source that confirms Walton’s statement, Boehler’s Diary, which is an eyewitness primary account, does.

The Diary, moreover, includes Boehler’s Farewell Letter to Wesley written while awaiting departure from Southampton to the mission in Georgia. It is an afterthought, a coda to the continuously flowing musical pieces of encounters, outpourings of grief, and testimonies that go before and enrich it. It is especially significant that Boehler’s admonishment of John to in turn admonish Charles with the result that both brothers would believe and claim the grace given by Christ, the second Adam, was suppressed by Wesley in his English translation of the letter of May 13, 1738, in his Journal. It was Wesley’s desire to hide his relative lack of spiritual progress before Boehler’s departure when compared to other Anglicans associated with Boehler: notably Richard Viney, James Hutton, and especially John Gambold. The Diary

---

7 It occurred as part of a typical Moravian “Betstunde” or bed hour before retiring in which prayer and testimony took place in the intimate surroundings of one’s room. In this case, “Betstundegate” took place in Wesley’s rooms rather than public ones as at Aldersgate.
8 John Wesley, A Christian Library, consisting of extracts of the choicest pieces of practical divinity which have been published in the English tongue, 30 vols. (London, 1819-1827). It constitutes a part of Wesley’s library which is found in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, England.
9 Christopher Walton, Notes to the Memorial to William Law (privately published at London, 1854); available in the research wing section of the New York Public Library, Fifth Avenue, New York.
indicates that Boehler did not consider Charles or John awakened in the way that Holy Club member and Anglican priest John Gambold was by this date.

The *Diary* begins with Gambold’s spiritual narrative shared during his first meeting with Boehler as they shared a room overnight. Wesley’s *Journal* begins a few days later on February 28, 1738, with Wesley’s meeting with Boehler. For Boehler, Gambold’s spiritual narrative formed the nucleus of his testimony to his subsequent conversion. Still in a restless state after ten years of a futile search for peace, first in Luther’s commentaries and then with mystics such as Tauler, Gambold was four weeks later, according to page one of the *Diary*, “a completely different man because the doctrine of justification by faith which has mastered him.” Boehler then testified to Oxonian Master Wells who immediately agreed to stop using his philosophical training in these matters of faith and asserted that he was confident that he would gain faith in the near future.

Two weeks later on March 16, 1738, Wesley was still being encouraged by Boehler to “let the source flow so that this soul can come nearer to the Savior.” He astutely observed that Wesley was “spoiling it for himself.” On March 26, Boehler somewhat sadly confided to his *Diary* and to Zinzendorf in the abbreviated letter version, “I couldn’t get any further with him before this.” In his native German, the image he uses is of winning the candidate over: “konnte ich auch nicht vor dieses mal mit ihm bringen.”

One of the reasons for Wesley’s greater difficulty in being converted is suggested by Boehler’s May 3, 1738, entry concerning Wesley “still going over old matters.” This could refer to the way Wesley felt Spangenberg, Boehler’s superior, answered his questions in Georgia like a politician, not simply and directly, despite his eagerness to be one of the Moravians. It was even more likely caused by Wesley’s state of mind while waiting for final release by his trustees from the old matter of the failed mission in Georgia. It was not brought to a close until April 26, after Betstundegate on April 23. Most importantly, the doctrine of faith alone, *glaubenslehre*, so central to the Moravian viewpoint, was still difficult and would always be difficult for Wesley to accept unaccompanied by works. This prompted Boehler in turn to be displeased with Wesley’s preaching, even as close to his departure as May 4, 1738, “I understood everything in English now, and it was not as it should be.”

In addition to Gambold’s spiritual attainments, young Hutton’s spiritual progress under Boehler posed a slight embarrassment for Wesley. Before his departure for Georgia, Wesley had been the mentor of Hutton’s spiritual progress. Wesley was the author of the journal articles from Georgia which Hutton read at the Aldersgate society meetings. Hutton probably did not participate in Betstundegate on April 23 or at other Betstundes, since he led public meetings. However, on May 6 and 9, Boehler wrote that he was overjoyed at “how he [Hutton] had made a breakthrough with the Savior.” Like other Anglicans such as Gambold, Hutton testified that he had found
“the sacrament, so central for Anglicans, did not shut out sin and that he could only believe by coming to Jesus as a poor sinner.” Boehler thought, then, that both Wesleys had lost time and ground excusing their lack of faith in favor of their good works. On the basis of what John and Charles had explicitly accomplished by works, they sincerely thought themselves not as bad as other men. However, Boehler never permitted them to escape their responsibility for disbelief, even mentioning faith at least seven times in the brief Farewell Letter to John.

Based on this fuller perspective, one can now reach conclusions concerning the question whether John Wesley could be trusted for the accuracy of what he tells us in his Journal regarding his culminating spiritual experience on May 24, 1738, and that of his brother three days earlier. Is it credible that in just a few weeks Wesley passed from being an inquirer at the beginning of May to being a believer at the end of May? Let us consider his Journal references to his brother’s conversion experience compared with Boehler’s Diary. On May 3, 1738, John surprisingly stated that, “his brother had a long and particular conversation with Peter Boehler and it now pleased God to open his eyes, so that he also saw clearly what was the nature of that one, true, living faith, whereby alone through grace we are saved.” It is rather difficult to understand how the seriously ailing Charles, often unconscious, could make a commitment weeks before John. According to Boehler, on February 28, the date of their first meeting, Charles was “deeply troubled and does not know how to go about learning to know the Savior.” John, however, was described by Boehler as, “recognizing he does not yet know the Savior aright, and willing to listen.”

Charles’ progress could also have been delayed by his resistance to Boehler’s special teaching on instantaneous faith based on personal experience. He left the room in anger because John confessed publicly his own lack of faith as being neither sufficient nor instantaneous in nature. Yet John would have had us believe that it was Boehler who finished the process of Charles’ awakening in late May. In contrast, Charles recorded in his more detailed Journal entry John Bray’s pivotal role in his conversion. Boehler had already left for Georgia at the beginning of May and Charles had moved to Mr. Bray’s to be cared for as he recovered from pleurisy.

Even if the hypothesis that Boehler did not have as much spiritual influence on Charles’ awakening as on John’s is valid, it is important to uncover why John would suggest their conversions were similar. According to John, the Wesley conversions originated with Boehler’s thought on instantaneous belief. The context is important. January to July, 1740, was a period of deep depression for Charles during which he almost defected to the Moravians. Charles was disillusioned with having to teach his brother’s doctrine of the

---

11 Journal I, April 25, 1738: “My brother was very angry and told me I did not know what mischief I had done while talking thus.”
attainment of perfection, even before death, through the means of grace or ordinances. John was at great pains to prove to himself, Charles, and others that they were unanimous on this controversial theological issue. Charles seems instead to have held that perfection was more often brought about through suffering and was not consummated until death.

Following John Wesley’s logic, if he can convince the public that Charles’ conversion and his own originated entirely from the same source, the public would perceive that their theology would be unquestionably the same. As critic Bernard Holland expressed in the presupposition of his discussion on conversion theology, “like conversions yield like theologies.” It seems that John was not above rewriting his brother’s conversion history and therefore may not have been above rewriting his own. John’s conversion gains credence by the affirmation of his brother’s three days before his. What was important to John was the advancement of his movement over its chief competitor after 1740, the Moravians.

Let us now examine the Betstunde account of April 23, 1738, of Boehler’s Diary in greater detail to judge how it might have threatened the success of Wesley’s movement. It directly follows Boehler’s description of Shepherd Wolf’s conversion which had peaked on April 9, 1738. Other witnesses named by Boehler at the Betstunde of April 23, 1738, are a Dresden citizen, Mr. Hauptman, who was converted on April 9, and Abraham Richter, a Stalsand merchant and close friend of Zinzendorf. The fourth, not named, might have been Anglican Richard Viney, who had come to grace on April 8 and often served as translator. When Wesley mentioned April 23, 1738, in his Journal, he named only himself and Boehler, while Boehler named everyone but the fourth man.

Boehler wrote, “the young Wolf testified very sincerely, forcefully, reflectively of his grace to Wesley and the others.” Under earlier entries Boehler recalled how at the beginning of the year, Wolf was very “confused.” Several weeks later, “when the Savior revealed himself to his inner being so gloriously, he was changed in words, deeds, and looks, believing now that the Savior has done everything for him.” Boehler was referring to Wolf’s total dependence on Christ’s merit. Boehler described Wesley’s astounded response to Wolf’s testimony as, “den Kopf geschlagen,” that he looked as though his head had been knocked off. He answered Boehler’s question, “What do you believe now?” with a “flat refusal that four testimonies could neither prove anything nor convince him of anything.” Boehler determinedly offered to bring eight more people to testify. Wesley then tried to take control by standing up and suggested they all sing the Pietist hymn made known to him by the Moravians that he had translated during his mission in Georgia,

---


14 The German expression *confusen Gemuthweg*, which would be applied to Wesley the next month when he visited Herrnhut, Germany. It implied being unable to testify.
“My Heart before Thee Prostrate Falls” (1711). Its importance to Wesley is indicated by its position as the fourth hymn in his first published collection of hymns in 1737 in Charlestown.

Concluding the entry, the Diary account of Betstundegate mentioned Wesley took only Boehler into his bedroom and confided that he was now convinced by what Boehler had said about faith. The Diary continued: “Wesley had been in tears wiping his eyes throughout the singing, and admits to not having faith but promising to preach faith alone if he could only have it. But how could he now help himself and come to this faith? He is a person who has not sinned as grossly as others.” Boehler hastened to strongly disagree: “Unbelief is serious enough to condemn him. The Savior cannot assist him unless he keeps on standing by the Savior’s door.” Boehler then prayed fervently with Wesley “in the bloody name of the Savior that his soul would become more fully awakened.” The Diary indicates that despite coming closer than at any other time, perhaps even than Aldersgate, Wesley missed his altar call. He did not give his hand at Boehler’s request. If he had done so, Wesley would have shown Boehler “he wants to learn to believe” or in effect believes.

As noted English Methodist scholar, Henry Rack, who is proficient in German, stated, “The problem with Wesley is penetrating his smoke screen which he consciously or unconsciously has created by his Journals and other portrayals of himself and his movement.” Wesley, mindful of his place in history, viewed Boehler as sent to him by God. However, we have seen that Wesley tended to view himself in his Journal as the only one being evangelized by Boehler. An examination of the Diary in its entirety shows that Boehler directly influenced a score of others who had at the time either greater promise in attaining faith as in the case of Master Wells, or more grace and commitment to the Moravians, as did John Gambold and James Hutton.

By approximately 1740, Wesley was not above misrepresenting Charles’ conversion in his Journal in order to maintain the perception of uniformity in the leadership of his movement. Wesley felt he must defend his theology of perfection which defined his very identity in opposition to his rivals, the Moravians. The Moravians had been stealing his former flock of Holy Club members such as Ingham, Delamotte, Gambold, and Hutton. This problem dates from Boehler’s London-Oxford mission. When each brother’s final account of their awakening is compared in their Journal accounts, it is clear that different experiences led to different theologies of conversion and ensuing sanctification. Wesley was at pains to conceal the fact that after Boehler left, Mr. Bray’s spiritualism was an important influence in Charles’ religious experience. After the Fetter Lane rupture and John’s meeting with Zinzendorf on September, 1741, Charles reaffirmed his loyalty to his brother.
The spiritual highpoint of April 23, 1738, which Boehler witnessed and recorded in his London Diary was also recorded in Wesley’s Journal only partially and as a mere prelude to Aldersgate because it was not advantageous to his movement. Wesley later largely omitted mention of even the Aldersgate account when his identity and recognition are firmly established. Nevertheless, while at the same time distancing the future Methodist movement from Moravian origins, Aldersgate paid homage to Halle Pietist teachings which rival Zinzendorf had come to reject and now opposed. However, Zinzendorf’s assistant Spangenberg and his disciple Boehler, who had been mentored at Jena University in Pietistic teachings quite recently, may have carried some traces of these teachings in their conversion theology, especially Boehler’s teaching on instantaneous faith.

Unlike Betstundegate, Wesley first made sure that Aldersgate, his public testimony of assurance, took place at Hutton’s society, which was not exclusively Moravian at that time. A second difference was that the evening centered on what had become a traditional Pietist reading, Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans devoted to the doctrine of faith alone. Thirdly, the account specified that it took place at a specific hour as required by Halle Pietist conversion narrative tradition.

In the 1980s, Timothy L. Smith correctly deduced from his work on the chronology of Wesley’s sermons that when Wesley edited and published the Aldersgate account in 1740, he sought to defend himself against having been rejected as leader of the English Moravians at Fetter Lane. This period began with Wesley’s first meeting with Zinzendorf in Marienborn in the summer of 1738. It continued for the next two years with Hutton’s competition with Wesley for the leadership of the Fetter Lane society. It only ended with Wesley’s rupture with the English Moravians on July 20, 1740, when he took his followers with him to another location in London. But since Smith was apparently unaware of Betstundegate, he did not deal with the role of Charles’ theology during the period of January, 1741. Smith did consider the role of Aldersgate as a ploy to show the Moravians that Wesley’s conversion experience had been as admirable as any of the conversions of the Herrnhutters. However, after a translation has been made of the complete Diary, Aldersgate appears to be rather more an attempt to define and defend Wesley’s movement. It appears to fulfill everything that the Betstundegate experience promised but could not fulfill.

Further, a serious reading of Boehler’s narrative of Betstundegate has implications beyond Aldersgate. It points to one of the causes of the subsequent rupture from the Moravians on July 20, 1740. The two movements, in some ways parallel, remained separated forever. Wesley, in omitting his real status as mere inquirer, hoped to illicit our sympathy for his exclusion from the leadership of the Fetter Lane society. At the end of three months of evangelism, the general Moravian perception was that Wesley was still an inquirer earnestly seeking grace. Yet we have seen that some Wesleyan scholars, including Outler, Rattenbury, and Schmidt have viewed Wesley
as a co-founder of the Fetter Lane society alongside his spiritual director, Boehler. However, Wesley admitted that Boehler was much more advanced than him spiritually and this opinion is supported by the *Diary*.

Boehler had pointed out to Wesley immediately on his return to London from Georgia how his philosophical reasoning was placing a stumbling block to faith. Wesley’s valiant yet failed attempts to evolve spiritually into the Moravian conversion model indicate the presence of serious obstacles. His own movement was already forming in his mind before his visit to Herrnhut in the summer of 1738. Some aspects of it had already been tried at Oxford in the form of the Holy Club and in the fledgling societies on his Georgia mission from 1736 to 1738. For Wesley, the Moravian doctrine of faith without works precluded sanctification and risked a fall into antinomianism. To the Moravians he would always be the “English preacher” they regarded as principally as an inquirer. Boehler, however, was enthusiastic about Wesley’s plans to visit Herrnhut because he thought “now Wesley would be wholly ours.”

Boehler was right that everyone who joined them had made the visit first to Herrnhut before being hired by Zinzendorf, including Boehler himself and Spangenberg. But history proves that Wesley did not become wholly Moravian. In September of 1738, when he returned from his pilgrimage to the center of Moravianism, Wesley must have realized that it was unlikely that he would be hired as a worker in the Moravian movement, particularly by their leader Count Zinzendorf, because as even Pastor Seifert said at the time, he had his own vineyard to cultivate.