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OTHER THOUGHTS ON ALDERSGATE: HAS THE CONVERSIONIST PARADIGM COLLAPSED?

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Among contemporary Methodist historians, the marking of the 250th anniversary of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience will perhaps best be remembered not for its joyful commemorations, but for the intense scholarly debate which it has spawned. Theodore Jennings, for instance, not only observed in 1988 that "Aldersgate [was] largely a non-event,"[1] but he also maintained that as Methodism celebrated this anniversary it was only celebrating "its own willful distortion of its own history, its own apostasy from Wesleyan theology."[2] Likewise and more recently, Randy Maddox, editor of *Aldersgate Reconsidered,* decried the continuing celebration of Aldersgate and suggested commemorating the formation of the first Methodist society (1739) or even Wesley's death (1791) as suitable, and more theologically appropriate, replacements.[3]

Interestingly, what lies behind such calls for replacement is the assumption that the "standard" theological interpretation of Aldersgate as John Wesley's conversion experience is irretrievably flawed since it is unable to incorporate Wesley's later journal disclaimers (where the Methodist leader modifies some of his entries made in 1738), nor can it reflect adequately the emphases of the mature Wesley.[4] However, the thesis of this present essay is that the methodology used by contemporary historians like Jennings and Maddox, who together seek to deconstruct a rich interpretive tradition, is itself seriously flawed in that it mistakes the *claim* that the conversionist model is unable to take into account the later Wesley for an *argument.* Consequently, this essay will critically examine

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[1]Theodore Jennings, "John Wesley *Against* Aldersgate," *Quarterly Review,* Vol. 8, No. 3 (Fall 1988): 7. Bracketed material is mine; I have changed the present tense to the past.
[2]Jennings, 22.
[3]Randy L. Maddox, "Celebrating Wesley—When?" *Methodist History,* Vol. 24, No. 2 (January 1991): 75. Though Maddox justifies the commemoration of Wesley's death as reinforcing the perspective of the mature Wesley, he hardly demonstrates what theological characteristics of the mature Wesley must be brought into play and, more importantly, what precise difference they would make.
[4]See Jennings, "Against Aldersgate," 8–11, and Randy Maddox, ed., *Aldersgate Reconsidered* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 15–16. Note that Maddox's description of the "standard" interpretation contains a number of inaccuracies. My own work, for example, is misquoted ("dangerous new wave in Wesley studies"); moreover, Maddox contends, on my behalf, that the standard interpretation has been the position of Methodist scholars ever since Wesley! However, see my piece "Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Aldersgate: Coherence or Confusion?" which is forthcoming in the *Wesleyan Theological Journal* where I clearly state that Frank Baker and Umphrey Lee questioned the accuracy of the conversionist view.

each of Wesley's journal disclaimers and will, in turn, demonstrate that such evidence does not overturn the conversionist interpretation, as is supposed, but only those distortions and stereotypes which have been mistaken for that interpretation.

The Claim That the Conversionist Model Is Faulty

(1) The Problem of Definitions

Before the present thesis can be explored, it is necessary to define clearly and succinctly just what constitutes the "standard" or conversionist interpretation of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience. Indeed, one of the difficulties of the work of Jennings and of a volume like *Aldersgate Reconsidered* is the lack of definitional precision in each. Jennings, for instance, quickly moves from a discussion of a conversionist reading of Wesley's journal to what he calls "Aldersgateism" and contends that the latter entails the ability "to date one's conversion and that nothing after this is really important."[5] Moreover, in *Aldersgate Reconsidered,* Roberta Bondi argues – confusing the doctrines of initial and entire sanctification – that the effects of Aldersgate spirituality are destructive,[6] since it indicates that one "ought to be full of simple love for God and neighbor"[7] from the day one becomes a Christian. And David Lowes Watson, for his part, implies that the association of Aldersgate with the new birth has led to a deprecation of the means of grace and to the neglect of the discipline evident in Wesley's General Rules of the United Societies.[8] However, observe that in each of these descriptions, the data are culled not from the arguments of such scholars as Tyerman, Cell, or Rattenbury, who represent the standard interpretation, but from a contemporary *ecclesiastical* context where all sorts of distortions of a tradition (and stereotypes) can emerge.[9]

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[5]Jennings, 11, 20.

[6]Roberta C. Bondi, "Aldersgate and Patterns of Methodist Spirituality," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered,* ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 22.

[7]Bondi, 21-22.

[8]David Lowes Watson, "Aldersgate Street and the General Rules: The Form and the Power of Methodist Discipleship," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered,* Maddox, 36. Though Watson is correct in underscoring the importance of such things as rules and the moral law in the Christian life, he nevertheless overstates his case especially when he contends that "the form *and* the power of early Methodist discipleship lay in its methods" (45-46, emphasis is mine). It is, however, much more accurate to state that, for Wesley at least, the form indeed lay in the methods, but the power in *the Holy Spirit.* See Wesley's sermons "The Means of Grace" and "The Witness of the Spirit, I" and "The Witness of the Spirit, II" in Albert C. Outler, ed., *The Works of John Wesley,* Vols. 1-4, *The Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 1:376-97 and 1:267-98.

[9]Maddox attempts to offer a more accurate representation of "the standard interpretation." Unfortunately, his use of the phrases "pre-Christian moralist" and "true Christian believer" are left undefined. Cf. Maddox, *Reconsidered,* 13.

In light of this lack of clarity, and also for the sake of hermeneutical responsibility, the conversionist interpretation will be defined not in terms of contemporary church practice or abuse, but in terms of those authors who are the best representatives of this interpretive school—such authors as Henry Moore, Luke Tyerman, Nehemiah Curnock, George Croft Cell, William Cannon, J. Ernest Rattenbury, Martin Schmidt, and V. H. H. Green.[10] When this is done, the conversionist model emerges with all of its many nuances intact, and the Aldersgate experience appears as the time when John Wesley encountered a gracious God, exercised justifying faith, was born anew, and when he received a measure of assurance. It is, therefore, in this restricted sense that the phrase will be used throughout this essay.

(2) The Four Journal Disclaimers and the Mature Wesley

(a) The First Disclaimer

In 1774, Wesley qualified some of his earlier statements which were written in his journal just a few months prior to his Aldersgate experience. Of these four notes, which are often called disclaimers, the first deals with the topic of conversion, and it therefore has received considerable attention. The text, to which it was appended, reads as follows:

> It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity. But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why (what I the least of all suspected), that I who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.[11]

However, in 1774, Wesley added the editorial comment, "I am not sure of this."[12] But just what does this statement signify? Upon closer examination, the emphasis on uncertainty in the note suggests that neither (a) "I was never myself converted to God," nor (b) "I was converted to God" can be unequivocally affirmed. In other words, on this level, the question of whether or not Wesley was converted in Georgia remains very much

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[10]To be sure, these authors maintain slightly different emphases on this topic; nevertheless, their *general* position clearly resonates with what is defined here as a conversionist view. Cf. Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley,* Vol. 1 (New York: N. Bangs and J. Emory, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1826), 198ff; Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley,* 3 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin), 1:179ff; Nehemiah Curnock, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.,* 8 vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), 1:33ff; George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1935), 28, 73, 185, and 361; William Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1946), 66–80; J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Conversion of the Wesleys* (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), 25, 42, and 82; Martin Schmidt, *John Wesley: A Theological Biography,* 2 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:213–311; and V. H. H. Green, *John Wesley* (London: Thomas Nelson Ltd., 1964), 60–63.

[11]W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Works of John Wesley,* Vol. 18, *Journals and Diaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 214.

[12]Ward and Heitzenrater, 214.

open and not closed as Jennings presumes.[13] Given this ambiguity, it is perhaps best to ascertain the meaning of this note in concert with Wesley's other editorial changes. Beyond this, it should be borne in mind that not only is the word "conversion" one which Wesley seldom used, but also, and more importantly, that he defined it much more broadly than is often done today.[14]

(b) The Second Disclaimer

1. The Faith of a Servant in Terms of the Spirit of Bondage

The text to which Wesley attached his second note explores the subject of what constitutes a Christian—a subject which, contrary to popular belief, the Methodist evangelist treated often and in considerable depth. In February 1738, for instance, Wesley reasoned:

> Does all this [the having a *rational conviction* of all the truths of Christianity] give me a claim to the holy, heavenly, divine character of *a Christian?* By no means. If the oracles of God are true, if we are still to abide by 'the law and the testimony', all these things, though when ennobled by faith in Christ they are holy, and just, and good, yet without it are 'dung and dross', meet only to be purged away by 'the fire that never shall be quenched'.[15]

But, in 1774, in reference to the phrase "yet without it" Wesley explained: "I had even then the faith of a servant, though not that of a son."[16] Remarkably, with the notable exception of Richard Heitzenrater, no one in the current debate about Aldersgate has explored in detail the theological significance of this distinction. In fact, Jennings, who is typical of this tendency, simply concludes after an unmistakably brief discussion:

> Neither before nor after did Wesley find it possible to 'love' the God he so vigorously served. Yet serve he did, whether as servant or as son; and in the end that was all that mattered to him.[17]

However, the distinction between these two kinds of faith was not a matter of indifference to Wesley as demonstrated by its repeated occurrence in his writings. In particular, the Methodist leader defined the phrases

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[13]Jennings, "Against Aldersgate," 8.

[14]For an example of Wesley's use of the word conversion see John Telford, ed., *The Letters of John Wesley, A.M.,* 8 vols. (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 4:40–41. For Wesley's definition of this word see John Wesley, *The Complete English Dictionary,* 3rd ed. (London: Hawes, 1777). Moreover, though Wesley defined the word conversion differently than is done today, his understanding of the theological complex of justification, regeneration, and a measure of assurance (which contemporaries call conversion) is similar to modern usage and that of this present essay.

[15]Ward and Heitzenrater, *Journals and Diaries,* 18:214–215. Bracketed material is the antecedent of the word "this."

[16]Ward and Heitzenrater, 215. Also note that Wesley revealed that he lacked the faith of a son in January 1738 in an additional editorial comment. Cf. Ward and Heitzenrater, *Journals and Diaries,* 18:215.

[17]Jennings, "Against Aldersgate," 19.

"the faith of a servant" and "the faith of a son" in at least two ways: one in terms of the spirit of bondage and the spirit of adoption, the other in terms of the question of assurance. Concerning the former usage, in his sermon *The Spirit of Bondage and of Adoption,* written in 1746, Wesley differentiates the characteristics of the servants of God from those of a child of God. He points out, for example, that servants, those under a spirit of bondage, find that "sin [is] let loose upon the soul."[18] They feel sorrow of heart, remorse, and fear,[19] and they desire to break loose from the chains of sin, but cannot.[20] Indeed, their spiritual condition, Wesley continues, is most aptly described by the Apostle Paul in *Romans,* chapter seven.[21] Significantly, not only is the distinction servant/son properly associated with that of the spirit of bondage/the spirit of adoption, but it is also one that the *mature* Wesley continued to make as indicated by his comments in 1788: "Exhort him to press on by all possible means, till he passes 'from faith to faith'; from the faith of a *servant* to the faith of a *son*; from the spirit of bondage unto fear, to the spirit of childlike love."[22]

Even more troubling for those contemporary historians who wish to impugn the "standard" interpretation of Aldersgate (as properly defined above) is Wesley's claim, made late in his career, that the servants of God are "still waiting for the kingdom of God."[23] Thus, in his spiritual counsel to Ann Bolton in 1768 the Oxford don remarked: "Certain it is that He loves you. And He has already given you the faith of a servant. You want only the faith of a child."[24] And later, in 1770, Wesley once again assessed Ms. Bolton's spiritual condition: "I am glad you are still waiting for the kingdom of God: although as yet you are rather in the state of a servant than of a child."[25] By implication, then, Wesley's depiction of the faith of a servant here and elsewhere reveals that prior to Aldersgate, by his own mature admission, he himself was still waiting for the kingdom of God.

Furthermore, in line with this interpretation, Wesley's recognition "that there is a medium between a child of God and a child of the devil—namely, a servant of God,"[26] his acknowledgment that there are degrees of faith, and his growing appreciation of the faith of a servant of God[27]

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[18]Outler, *Sermons,* 1:257. Bracketed material is mine.
[19]Outler, 1:257.
[20]Outler, 1:258.
[21]Outler, 1:258. Observe that the servants of God are awakened, but they see not a God of love, but One of wrath. It is therefore important not to confuse the issue of awakening with regeneration (and conversion).
[22]Outler, 4:35–36.
[23]Telford, *Letters,* 5:207.
[24]Telford, 5:86.
[25]Telford, 5:207.
[26]Telford, 6:272–73.
[27]Telford, 5:207. However, in this letter to Ann Bolton, Wesley also exclaims: "it is a blessed thing to be even a servant of God!"

must neither be mistaken for an identification of this faith with that of a child of God nor must it serve as the basis for the claim that Wesley lowered the standard of what constitutes a real Christian (the proper Christian faith) in order to include the servants of God.[28] To be sure, though many Methodist historians are well aware that Wesley separated nominal from real Christianity early on, in 1725 to be exact,[29] few have noticed that such a distinction, though slightly modified, frequently surfaced in the Oxford leader's later writings. In 1787, for example, highlighting one of the unexpected consequences of the spread of Deism, Wesley wrote: "this was the most direct way whereby *nominal* Christians could be prepared, first, for tolerating, and, afterwards, for receiving, *real* Christianity."[30] More specifically, observe how the elderly Wesley not only associated real Christians with the new birth, but how he also distinguished these believers from the servants of God—the very thing which conversionist positions often do—in his sermon, *Walking by Sight and Walking by Faith:*

> How short is this description of real Christians! And yet how exceeding full! It comprehends, it sums up, the whole experience of those that are truly such, from the time they are born of God till they remove into Abraham's bosom. For who are the 'we' that are here spoken of? All that are true Christian believers. I say 'Christian', not 'Jewish' believers. All that are not only *servants* but *children* of God.[31]

And a year later, in 1789, Wesley's strong identification of real Christianity with regeneration, with the children of God, is again unmistakable. "How great a thing it is to be a Christian," he declares in his sermon *On a Single Eye,* "to be a real, inward, scriptural Christian! Conformed in heart and life to the will of God! Who is sufficient for these things? None, *unless he be born of God.*"[32]

If the preceding analysis is accurate, how then is some apparently contradictory material like that from the sermon *On Faith* to be understood? For in this piece, Wesley confessed:

> Indeed nearly fifty years ago, when the preachers commonly called Methodists began to preach that grand scriptural doctrine, salvation by faith, they were not sufficiently

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[28]Jennings marks the decisive beginning of Wesley's mission and ministry in 1725, the year when he "committed himself to entire holiness of life." But commitment, once again, must not be confused with having the graces and prerogatives of a child of God. Cf. Jennings, "Against Aldersgate," 19. However, there is a sense in which Wesley did, in fact, lower the standard of what constitutes a real Christian. For example, under the early Moravian influence, the Methodist leader had initially confused justification with full assurance (setting the standard much too high), but after this error was noted and corrected, he did not thereby set his standard for the proper Christian faith any lower than the marks of the new birth.

[29]Outler, *Sermons,* 3:152.

[30]Outler, 3:452.

[31]Outler, 4:49.

[32]Outler, 4:121-22. Emphasis is mine. For a technical, detailed, and critical discussion of Outler's argument that the later Wesley moved away from his earlier exclusivist standards of true faith and salvation see chapter six in my forthcoming book *Evangelical Christianity: John Wesley's Homiletical Theology.*

> apprised of the difference between a servant and a child of God. They did not clearly understand that even one 'who feared God, and worketh righteousness,' is accepted of him.[33]

And compare this passage with similar comments made to Melville Horne at about the same time:

> When fifty years ago my brother Charles and I, in the simplicity of our hearts, told the good people of England that unless they knew their sins were forgiven, they were under the wrath and curse of God, I marvel, Melville, they did not stone us! The Methodists, I hope, know better now; we preach assurance as we always did, as a common privilege of the children of God; but we do not enforce it, under the pain of damnation, denounced on all who enjoy it not.[34]

That Wesley in 1788 (and much earlier) had a greater appreciation of the faith of those "who feared God and worked righteousness" is clear, and indeed he even pointed out that such people are now accepted of God given the light and grace that they have. But this last point of acceptance must not be mistaken for justification or with being a real Christian, which is quite a different matter. To illustrate, the only requirement which Wesley established for membership in a Methodist society was a "desire to flee from the wrath to come."[35] And though he obviously did not want to discourage or discount this "fearful faith," as he once did, Wesley did not consider it evidence of either justification or regeneration. Put another way, though the servants of God lack the proper Christian faith—and hence cannot enjoy the privileges of the sons and daughters of God—they yet have a measure of faith which arises from the prevenient and convincing grace which precedes it, and are *for that reason* not to be discouraged. Consequently, Wesley's seasoned and relatively favorable estimation of the faith of a servant probably emerged from his consideration that such a faith, in the normal course of spiritual development, would in time become the faith of a son. In fact, in his sermon *On Faith,* Wesley highlights just such a consideration:

> And, indeed, *unless the servants of God halt by the way,* they will receive the adoption of sons. They will receive the *faith* of the children of God by his *revealing* his only-begotten Son in their hearts. . . . And whosoever hath this, the Spirit of God witnesseth with his spirit that he is a child of God.[36]

Moreover, Wesley's appreciation of a degree of acceptance and his exhortation to the servants of God to improve the grace of God is likewise revealed in a homily produced in 1788, *On the Discoveries of Faith,* in which he counsels:

> Whoever has attained this, the faith of a servant, . . . in consequence of which he is *in a degree* (as the Apostle observes), 'accepted with him' . . . . Nevertheless he should

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[33]Outler, 3:497.
[34]Robert Southey, *The Life of John Wesley* (New York: W. B. Gilley, 1820), 1:258.
[35]Rupert E. Davies, *The Works of John Wesley,* Vol. 9, *The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 70.
[36]Outler, *Sermons,* 3:497–98. The first emphasis is mine.

> be exhorted not to stop there; not to rest till he attains the adoption of sons; till he obeys out of love, which is the privilege of all the *children* of God.[37]

Simply put, the faith of a servant of God is valued not only for the measure of faith that it is, but also for what it will soon become: the qualitatively different faith of a child of God.

2. The Faith of a Servant in Terms of the Question of Assurance

In Wesley studies today, it is well known that when John Wesley was under the strong influence of the English Moravians, he closely identified justifying faith with full assurance.[38] However, by the summer of 1740, he began to realize that there are both degrees of faith *and* degrees of assurance and that a child of God may exercise justifying faith which is mixed with both doubt and fear.[39] Nevertheless, a second issue, which can be differentiated from the one just cited, concerns the question, once again, of whether Wesley ever lowered the standard of what he termed the proper Christian faith or real Christianity. This time, however, the question will be considered not with respect to the spirit of bondage, and its implications, but with respect to the matter of assurance.

On the one hand, the initial answer to this question must be "yes" since Wesley obviously modified his earlier erroneous views on the association of full assurance with justifying faith as just noted. But, on the other hand, Wesley, for the most part, still identified the assurance that one's sins are forgiven as a vital ingredient of the proper Christian faith. Thus, for example, in response to the question "Is justifying faith a divine assurance that Christ loved me, and gave himself for me?" the Conference Minutes of 1747 recorded: "We believe it is."[40] And in a revealing letter to his brother Charles a month later, John illustrates his doctrine of assurance by pointing out: "(1) that there is such an explicit assurance; (2) that it is the common privilege of *real Christians;* (3) that it is *the proper Christian faith,* which purifieth the heart and overcometh the world."[41] In fact, in 1755, Wesley declared that "a man who is not assured that his sins are forgiven may yet have a kind or degree of faith which distinguishes him not only from a devil, but from an heathen," but he quickly added, clarifying his point, "But still I believe, the *proper Christian faith* which purifies the heart implies such a conviction."[42] And again, in a letter to

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[37]Outler, 4:35.

[38]Richard P. Heitzenrater, "Great Expectations: Aldersgate and the Evidences of Genuine Christianity," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered,* ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 88–91.

[39]Heitzenrater, 89.

[40]Thomas Jackson, ed., *The Works of John Wesley,* 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978), 8:291.

[41]Frank Baker, ed., *The Works of John Wesley,* vols. 25, 26, *The Letters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 26:254–55. Emphasis is mine.

[42]Baker, 26:575. Emphasis is mine.

Richard Tompson on February 5, 1756, Wesley affirms that "every *true Christian* believer has a 'sure trust and confidence in God that through the merits of Christ he is reconciled to God.'"[43]

Now the usual rebuttal to the antecedent evidence is that it does not reflect Wesley's mature views on the subject of assurance and, therefore, is to be discounted.[44] Granted, Wesley's later teaching is indeed marked by much more subtlety and sophistication, but what is remarkable about this later material is its basic continuity with the evidence already cited. Accordingly, in 1765 in his sermon *The Scripture Way of Salvation* Wesley acknowledges:

> The Apostle says: 'There is one faith, and one hope of our calling', one Christian, saving faith, as 'there is one Lord' in whom we believe, and 'one God and Father of us all.' And it is certain this faith necessarily implies an *assurance* . . . that Christ loved me, and gave himself, for *me.*' For 'he that believeth' with the *true, living faith,* 'hath the witness in himself.'[45]

To be sure, it is precisely the aged Wesley who continues to relate, quite strongly, justifying faith with a *measure* of assurance (with an exception which will be detailed below) and hence with the proper Christian faith.[46] For if these relations do not hold, as Jennings seems to suggest, how then are Wesley's observations in 1775, a year *after* the journal disclaimers were written, to be assessed? For at that time, he exclaimed:

> But I know not how *anyone* can be a Christian believer till 'he hath' (as St. John speaks) 'the witness in himself'; till 'the Spirit of God witnesses with his spirit, that he is a child of God'—that is, in effect, till God the Holy Ghost witnesses that God the Father has accepted him through the merits of God the Son . . . .[47]

Again, during the decade of the 1780s, Wesley considered the faith of a son in terms of a spirit of adoption. "There is a medium between a child of God and a child of the devil—namely a servant of God," he writes to Alexander Knox in 1777. "This is *your* state. You are not yet a son, but you are a servant; and you are waiting for the Spirit of adoption . . . ."[48] Beyond this, in 1788, Wesley reasoned that the difference between a

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[43]Telford, 3:162. Emphasis is mine.

[44]Maddox, representative of this tendency, criticizes my earlier writings on Aldersgate and claims quite incorrectly that they "focus on Wesley material that is immediately post-Aldersgate (or, at most, 'mid-life') Wesley, scarcely mentioning the later Wesley and the qualifying footnotes in the last edition of the *Journal.*" Cf. Maddox, *Aldersgate Reconsidered,* 16.

[45]Outler, *Sermons,* 2:161. Emphasis is mine.

[46]Wesley displays degrees of assurance in terms of the distinctions between a babe, a young man, and a father in a letter to Joseph Benson in 1771. Note, however, that for Wesley "even babes in Christ are in such a sense perfect, or 'born of God . . . as, first, not to commit sin," and so these cannot be mistaken for the servants of God who are under a bondage of sin. Cf. Outler, *Sermons,* 2:105.

[47]Outler, *Sermons,* 2:385. Emphasis is mine.

[48]Telford, *Letters,* 6:272–73. Compare this with an earlier letter to Richard Tompson in July 1755. Cf. Baker, *Letters,* 26:575.

servant and a child of God is that "'He that believeth,' as a child of God, 'hath the witness in himself.' This the servant hath not."[49] More emphatically, he adds in his sermon *On Faith,* produced in 1788:

> Thus the faith of a child is *properly* and directly a divine conviction whereby every child of God is enabled to testify, 'the life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.' And whosoever hath this, 'the Spirit of God witnesseth with his spirit that he is a child of God.'[50]

Though seldom cited, the significant qualification and caution which Wesley does, after all, add to his association of justification and the assurance that one's sins are forgiven—an assurance occasionally marked by doubt and fear—is aptly expressed in a letter to Dr. Rutherforth in 1768, part of which reads as follows:

> I believe a consciousness of being in the favour of God (which I do not term plerophory, or full assurance, since it is frequently weakened, nay perhaps interrupted, by returns of doubt or fear) is the common privilege of Christians fearing God and working righteousness.
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> Yet I do not affirm there are no exceptions to this general rule. Possibly some may be in the favour of God, and yet go mourning all the day long. But I believe this is usually owing either to disorder of Body or ignorance of the gospel promises.[51]

Two issues need to be separated here which are often confused in the contemporary discussion. On the one hand, the elderly Wesley still did not identify nor confuse the faith of a servant, and its measure of acceptance, with the assurance that one's sins are forgiven, since being under "the spirit of bondage," a servant, properly speaking, lacks justifying faith. On the other hand, the Methodist leader recognized that in some exceptional cases those who are justified and regenerated (and hence children of God) may lack an assurance that their sins are forgiven because of either ignorance or bodily disorder.[52] However, in this second instance, since these believers are justified, they are more suitably referred to not as servants, but as the sons and daughters of God. That is, all servants lack

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[49]Outler, *Sermons,* 3:498.

[50]Outler, 3:498.

[51]Telford, *Letters,* 5:358. This may reflect Wesley's own condition in 1738. That is, perhaps Wesley experienced justification and regeneration sometime in 1738 prior to Aldersgate, and his assurance on May 24th therefore "completed" the process. Though a conversionist view can argue in this fashion, it would seem that 1738 would have to be the *terminus a quo* simply because before this time Wesley, by his own admission, confused the nature of justification and sanctification.

[52]Though a consciousness of acceptance is the common privilege of the children of God, and though it is a vital ingredient of the proper Christian faith, it is not essential to justifying faith. That is, in certain cases, one may be justified and yet lack assurance. Accordingly, Wesley wrote to Dr. Rutherforth in 1768: "Therefore I have not for many years thought a consciousness of acceptance to be essential to justifying faith." Cf. Telford, *Letters,* 5:359. See also Lycurgus M. Starkey, Jr., *The Work of the Holy Spirit: A Study in Wesleyan Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 68–69.

assurance and are under a spirit of bondage, but not all who lack assurance are thereby servants, nor are they all under a spirit of bondage. There are, after all, exempt cases. Consequently, Wesley's mature designation of his own faith as that of a servant prior to May 1738 is much more revealing than either Jennings or Maddox has imagined.

3. *Outler's Claim That Wesley Repudiated His Earlier Exclusivist Distinctions*

Perhaps the most serious objection to the foregoing argument comes from Albert Outler himself, who has claimed that Wesley's perspective changed over the years and that he greatly modified his earlier distinctions of almost/altogether a Christian, and nominal/real Christianity.[53] In his preface to *The More Excellent Way,* for example, he claims:

> This is a practical essay in Christian ethics that also illustrates how far the later Wesley had moved away from his earlier exclusivist standards of true faith and salvation. It should be read alongside *The Almost Christian;* the startling contrast between the two reflects a half-century's experience as leader of a revival movement and also a significant change in his mind and heart.[54]

For the sake of clarity, it is best to divide Outler's claim into two separate issues: one concerning the definition of an almost Christian, the other, of an altogether Christian. Of the former term, Wesley writes in his sermon, *The Almost Christian,* written in 1741, that these believers have a form of godliness,[55] that they possess the outside of a real Christian,[56] and that they utilize all the means of grace.[57] Furthermore, if one compares these early descriptions with many of Wesley's writings during the 1780s, an essential continuity emerges.

What does change in time, however, is the latter part of the equation; that is, what it means to be an "altogether Christian." In *The Almost Christian,* for example, altogether Christians are described as those who love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength—and their neighbors as themselves.[58] Moreover, they have a faith "which purifies the heart, by the power of God who dwelleth therein, from pride, anger, desire, from all unrighteousness, from all filthiness of flesh and spirit."[59] But the preceding are obviously apt descriptions not of the new birth, what it means to be a real Christian, but of entire sanctification. However, in 1741, Wesley still mixed these ideas together, and it would not be until towards the end of the 1740s that he would clearly distinguish

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[53]Outler, *Sermons,* 3:152, Note 40.
[54]Outler, 3:262.
[55]Compare with the later sermon *The New Creation.* Cf. Outler, *Sermons,* 2:501.
[56]Compare with the homily *The End of Christ's Coming,* produced late in Wesley's life. Cf. Outler, *Sermons,* 2:483.
[57]See *The Unity of the Divine Being* in Outler, *Sermons,* 4:66.
[58]Outler, 1:137.
[59]Outler, 1:139.

the graces of Christian Perfection from those of initial sanctification.[60] So in this sense what Outler argues is, in fact, correct.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to contend (and it is not suggested here that Outler did *this*) that because Wesley clarified his thought and distinguished initial and entire sanctification he then lowered the threshold for the new birth which in turn eventually became his *standard* for what constitutes real Christianity. In his homily *On a Single Eye,* for instance, written late in his career, Wesley not only still uses the language of a "real Christian" in 1789, but he also correctly identifies it with regeneration and not with entire sanctification as he once did. In other words, almost Christians, those who lack the marks of the new birth, are almost Christians still: in 1741, in 1747, and in 1789 as well.

Given this line of argument, Outler's call for a comparison of *The Almost Christian* and *The More Excellent Way* is in one sense invalid, for he appears to assume that the distinction almost Christian/altogether Christian of the earlier sermon *The Almost Christian* corresponds to the distinction of the generality of Christians/the more excellent way as found in the later sermon *The More Excellent Way.* However, the two *sets* of groups compared in these homilies are *not* the same. To illustrate, in the first sermon, the "almost Christian" is a person who lacks the evidences of both justification and regeneration as set forth in *The Marks of the New Birth.*[61] The "altogether Christian" on the other hand is at the very least justified and regenerated (and possibly entirely sanctified). In light of this, is the phrase the "generality of Christians" as found in the later sermon, *The More Excellent Way,* actually equivalent to "the almost Christian" as Outler seems to suggest? Not really. Observe how Wesley defines "the generality of Christians" in this later production:

> From long experience and observation I am inclined to think that whoever finds redemption in the blood of Jesus, whoever is *justified,* has then the choice of walking in the higher or the lower path.[62]

In other words, these Christians are already justified and are about to embark either upon the higher path of entire sanctification or not. Simply put, in the sermon *The Almost Christian,* Wesley is comparing almost-Christians, though virtuous, with those who have at the very least been born of God. In his later sermon, he is comparing justified Christians with the entirely sanctified—or with the possibility of entire sanctification. Therefore, those who appeal to a comparison of these pieces in order to show that those who lack the marks of the new birth are indeed real Christians (and again it is not suggested that Outler did *this*) have failed to pay significant attention to Wesley's own theological vocabulary. Once

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[60]Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Mirror and Memory* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1989), 142.
[61]Outler, *Sermons,* 1:415ff.
[62]Outler, 3:266.

again, almost Christians remain almost Christians. The former part of the equation had never really *directly* changed.[63]

(c) The Third Disclaimer

Reflecting on his recent missionary work in Georgia, Wesley surveyed his spiritual condition once again in February 1738 and confessed in his journal:

> This then have I learned in the ends of the earth, that I am 'fallen short of the glory of God'; that my whole heart is 'altogether corrupt and abominable', . . . I am 'a child of wrath', an heir of hell; that my own works, my own sufferings, my own righteousness, are so far from reconciling me to an offended God, so far from making any atonement for the least of those sins . . . .[64]

Not surprisingly, the statement which Wesley added in errata in 1774 is "I believe not,"[65] and the second disclaimer, already cited, indicates the reason for this third one. In other words, Wesley attached this latter note because he had since come to realize that there is an intermediate state between a child of God and a child of wrath, namely, a servant of God. This means, then, that while Wesley was in Georgia, he obviously had a measure of faith and a degree of acceptance, but it was not the faith of a child of God, nor was it that of one who had entered the kingdom of God. Instead, it was the faith, once more, of one under the spirit of bondage.

(d) The Fourth Disclaimer

A few days after Wesley wrote down and renewed some of his old resolutions in order to foster his spiritual development—a habit he had learned from Jeremy Taylor—he visited his brother, Charles, on March 4, 1738, and wrote in his journal:

> I found my brother at Oxford, recovering from his pleurisy; and with him Peter Böhler. By whom (in the hand of the great God) I was on Sunday the 5th clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of 'that faith whereby alone we are saved.'[66]

However, in 1774 Wesley appended the phrase "with the full Christian salvation" to the last sentence above so that it now read: "By whom I was on Sunday the 5th clearly convinced of unbelief, of the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved *with the full Christian salvation.*"[67]

For his part, Jennings interprets this additional phrase as indicative of Wesley's later realization that what he had lacked back in March 1738

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[63]Naturally, if a change is made in terms of what constitutes an altogether Christian, this indirectly affects what it means to be an almost Christian. Nevertheless, the basic characteristics which Wesley employs to describe almost Christians hardly change. The real changes lie elsewhere. Cf. Outler, *Sermons,* 1:131–37.

[64]Ward and Heitzenrater, *Journals and Diaries,* 18:215.

[65]Ward and Heitzenrater, 18:215.

[66]Ward and Heitzenrater, 18:228.

[67]Ward and Heitzenrater, 18:228.

was not the faith of a child of God, but that which sanctifies entirely![68] However, it is one thing to contend that the early Wesley confused the ideas of initial and entire sanctification; indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that he did,[69] but it is quite another thing to maintain that the English preacher in retrospect attested that what he had lacked in 1738 was Christian Perfection. Put another way, one must not confuse Wesley's initial expectation for holiness and full assurance in 1738 with the perspective of the mature Wesley who had since that time separated initial and entire sanctification, and the assurance which pertains to each. That is, Wesley expected full assurance in 1738, not because he was already justified, as Jennings surmises, but because he had suffered under some of the doctrinal misconceptions of the English Moravians.

Now one possible explanation for Jennings' unlikely interpretation might be that when he observed the word "full" in the note, he immediately concluded Christian perfection. However, such a view is problematic for at least two additional reasons. First, if one argues, as Jennings and some Holiness writers do,[70] that what Wesley lacked in March 1738 was the faith which sanctifies entirely, then one must *also* demonstrate in detail at what point prior to this time Wesley was justified by faith and regenerated in heart and life. More importantly, one must establish all of this in terms of Wesley's own theological vocabulary as displayed, for instance, in such important sermons as *The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God* and *The Marks of the New Birth.* Furthermore, those who contend, like Maddox,[71] that Aldersgate is simply the time of Wesley's assurance, must likewise demonstrate in detail and convincingly when Wesley experienced the new birth prior to this time. Was Wesley born of God and free from the power of sin in 1725, 1733, 1735? If there ever were an impossible hypothesis to confirm, it is this.

Second, the term "full" in the phrase "the full Christian salvation" must be assessed in relation to the distinctions which have emerged from Wesley's other disclaimers. Thus, if Wesley were certain that he was converted in Georgia, and hence waiting for Christian perfection in March 1738, he would not have written in 1774, "I'm not sure of this." In addition, the distinction between the faith of a servant/the faith of a son not only developed over time with the result that Wesley came to a greater appreciation of the former, but he also still identified the faith of a son, in almost

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[68]Jennings, "Against Aldersgate," 10.

[69]On February 1, 1738, Wesley recorded in his journal: "I want that faith which none can have without knowing that he hath it. . . . For whosoever hath it is 'freed from sin'; *'the whole body of sin is destroyed'* in him." Cf. Ward and Heitzenrater, *Journals and Diaries,* 18:216. Emphasis is mine.

[70]Cf. W. Stephen Gunter, "Aldersgate, the Holiness Movement, and Experiential Religion" in *Aldersgate Reconsidered,* ed. Randy L. Maddox, 121–132.

[71]Randy L. Maddox, "Aldersgate: A Tradition History," in *Aldersgate Reconsidered,* ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1990), 145.

all instances, with a measure of assurance (that one's sins are forgiven) and with proper, true, real Christianity. In other words, Wesley's use of the term "full" in this context highlights the assurance which is the privilege of all who are born of God though some, either through ignorance or bodily distress, are not fully aware of this. The term, therefore, is another synonym for "proper," "true," and "real"; it embraces *all* the prerogatives which pertain to the children of God.

Conclusion: A Conversionist View with Nuances

Taking into account the insights of the journal disclaimers and the later Wesley, one can now restate the conversionist position in the following theses:

1. Wesley, through the influence of the English Moravians, initially expected to receive holiness and full assurance at Aldersgate.

2. Eventually, Wesley distinguished initial and entire sanctification in terms of freedom from the guilt, power, and being of sin, and assurance in terms of degrees.

3. Wesley developed a greater appreciation for the faith of the servants of God and affirmed that they are accepted in a degree because they fear God and work righteousness.

4. Though accepted for the measure of faith which they have, the servants of God have neither assurance that their sins are forgiven nor freedom from the guilt (justification) and power (regeneration) of sin.

5. If the servants of God "do not halt by the way" their faith, in the normal course of spiritual development, should issue in the faith of the children of God.

6. Wesley continued to distinguish nominal from real Christianity throughout his life and almost never identified the faith of a servant with the proper Christian faith or with real Christianity.

Corollary: Those who are justified by faith but lack assurance either through ignorance or bodily distress are exceptional cases and are suitably described as children of God.

Therefore:

7. When Aldersgate is stripped of its excesses due to the English Moravian influence what remains is the following:

   A. It was the time when John Wesley encountered a gracious God, exercised justifying faith, and received a measure of assurance (occasionally marked by doubt and fear).

   B. Since regeneration, according to Wesley, occurs simultaneously with justification, then Aldersgate must also be the occasion of his new birth.

   C. Given A and B, Aldersgate was the time when Wesley became a real, proper Christian according to his own mature criteria.

In summary, it has not been the intention of this present piece to demonstrate fully the cogency of the conversionist model. Much more work, no doubt, needs to be done. However, enough material has been explored to undermine the easy assumption that this interpretive scheme has already been surpassed by a more accurate one. Viewing Aldersgate as a crucial event does not, after all, preclude the incorporation of the

wisdom of the later Wesley. If anything, the ongoing discussion among Methodist historians may just well demonstrate the resiliency of the "standard" interpretation.

And, on the other hand, it is not at all clear that the "assurance only" assessment of Aldersgate—which is the preference of those who reject the conversionist view—can satisfactorily address some of the more salient problems in this area, the principal one being when John Wesley experienced justification and regeneration, if not on May 24th. Other problems, of course, include the Oxford don's continued stress on inward religion and his development of the theme of real Christianity throughout his life in terms of both the new birth and assurance as chronicled above. Consequently, Jennings' proclamation that Aldersgate is a non-event now appears as both strident and ill founded, and Maddox's call for the elimination of all Aldersgate celebrations emerges as both incautious and presumptuous.[72] Indeed, the purported demise of the conversionist interpretation, an event which is now the staple of Methodist journals and professional meetings, reminds one of Mark Twain's wry comment made to the Associated Press in 1897: "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."

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[72]For a discussion of the continuing value of Aldersgate as well as a practical guide for its commemoration, Cf. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., "Strangely Warmed," *The Interpreter* (April 1988), 11-13.