

WHAT BÖHLER GOT FROM WESLEY

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Early in 1730, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Bray lay dying in London after over twenty years of service in the living of St. Botolph Without, Aldgate, London. Earlier in his career, Bray served as Commissary to the Colony of Maryland, where he was instrumental in completing the establishment of Anglicanism as the official church. This experience so piqued his interest in missions that when he returned to England, he became a principal founder of both the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) and the Society for the Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK).¹

Bray's passion for missions was the cause of his receipt of a bequest of £1,000 to use in the evangelization of African slaves in America. Bray hired a catechist, one Mr. Clifford, and dispatched him to South Carolina to work there from about 1718 to 1721. Subsequently, Bray chose several men to be associated with himself in the further administration of the fund. Among them were John, Lord Percival (later Earl of Egmont),² and the Hales brothers, Robert and Stephen. Stephen Hales was a minister and a leading scientist, a Fellow of the Royal Society and one of the eight foreign members of the French Academy.³ The Associates of Dr. Bray, as the small group called itself, sent a few missionaries to the colonies while Bray himself developed an interest in the plight of the jails. Stephen Hales had done some work in developing ventilation systems for the prisons, and perhaps it was he who directed Bray's attention there. In the course of this study, Bray met the young James Edward Oglethorpe, who was leading a parliamentary committee inquiring into the same concern.

It came to Bray, as he lay on his deathbed in late 1729, that perhaps a charitable colony could be established in America for the relief of the poor of London who were in danger of being imprisoned for debt. Bray summoned Captain Thomas Coram, who, according to Horace Walpole, was "the most knowing person about the plantations I have ever talked with,"⁴ to consult with him about a colony. Coram recorded that:

¹ H. P. Thompson, *Thomas Bray* (London: SPCK, 1954), 98-99; John W. Lydekker, *Thomas Bray: Founder of Missionary Enterprise* (Philadelphia: The Church Historical Society, 1943), 12.

² *Dictionary of National Biography*, XLIV, 368-370.

³ *Dictionary of National Biography*, XXIV, 32-36.

⁴ *Dictionary of National Biography*, 194.

Dr. Bray told me a little before Christmas, 1729, his Death, he found, drew near for he was sure by his continued decay he should not live out the winter yet he would before he dyed find out a way to have a settlement made for the Reliefe of such honest poor Distressed Families from hence as by Losses, want of Employment or otherwise are reduced to poverty, and such who were persecuted for professing the Protestant religion abroad, to be happy by their Labour and Industry in some part of his Majesties Dominions in America, but was of the opinion the place I proposed was too far Northward, the Winters being very long there.⁵

Coram had for some time been pressing for the establishment of a colony in what would become Nova Scotia. With Nova Scotia out of the question, Bray and Coram settled on the only other possible area, at the south end of the settled region. Bray then sent for Stephen Hales, James Vernon (Commissioner of the Excise and clerk of the Council in Ordinary), Oglethorpe, Lord Percival, and two or three others, proposing the plan. Oglethorpe suggested expanding the Associates group to meet the increased responsibility and Bray agreed just before his death in February, 1730.⁶ The new Associates included Coram and nearly two dozen others, mostly members of Oglethorpe's parliamentary and philanthropic circles.⁷

The Associates of the Late Dr. Bray began to hold monthly meetings. They elected Oglethorpe chairman for the first year. They set as their goals the establishment of theological libraries in Great Britain and the colonies, the catechizing of slaves, and the establishment of a charitable colony. A grant of some £15,000 from the estate of Joseph King greatly facilitated the latter task. So, too, did royal approval. Because the charter for the new colony of "Georgia" designated its trustees by name and because not quite all of the Associates were included, the group finally resolved in 1732 to make it a separate organization to be called the "Trustees of the Colony of Georgia." No one was named trustee who was not already a member of the Associates. The trustees and the Associates were thus nearly identical in membership, shared the same meeting room and secretary, and worked together for several years. Indeed, the men sometimes forgot which group they were supposed to be, and on at least one occasion had to go back and re-pass a motion pertaining to the distribution of books because they were sitting as the Trustees of Georgia when they first voted on it.⁸

The establishment of the Georgia colony went ahead rapidly, generally

⁵ W. C. Ford, ed., "Letters of Thomas Coram" in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, LVI, 20.

⁶ *Proceedings*, LVI, 20.

⁷ Amos Aschbach Ettinger, *James Edward Oglethorpe, Imperial Idealist* (New York: Archon Books, 1968; first published by Clarendon Press, 1936), 110-120; the names, with a few discrepancies, are listed in Lydekker, 32n and in the Minute Book III, 13. The manuscript Minute Books noted here and hereafter are found on Library of Congress Microfilm # 65, MSS of Dr. Bray's Associates. The originals are in the SPG Building, London. References are to Reels 4 and 6, which are, respectively, the Minute Books Vol. I (1735-1768) and Vol. III (1730-1735). Hereafter called "Minute Book."

⁸ The meeting where the roles were reversed is reported in Allen D. Candler, ed., *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, I (Atlanta: Franklin Printing and Publishing Co., 1904), 74.

along the lines projected by Bray, as has been detailed in other documents. Oglethorpe led the first cadre of settlers to the new land in 1733 and established the town of Savannah on a bluff on the south bank of the river about ten miles inland from the sea. South Carolina was visible across the river. He laid out the town in a grid pattern, with frequent large squares which still stand there. A church was an early priority and there was a parish priest, Samuel Quincy, to provide spiritual guidance for the settlers.

Soon Oglethorpe set up a few small outlying settlements near Savannah and began plans to establish an outpost on Saint Simon's Island, a sandy barrier island which lay just off the coast about a hundred miles south of Savannah. This town, called Frederica, was visible evidence that Oglethorpe intended Georgia to be not merely a haven for the honest poor and the persecuted Protestants, but also a bulwark to protect the valuable Carolina plantations from the Spanish in Florida. One of the reasons the Trustees banned slavery in the colony was that it was intended, at least in part, to be a military colony defended by farmer-soldiers who would be fighting for hearth and home if an invasion occurred. Slaveholding would have diluted the deployment of yeoman farmers across the area. In 1742, Oglethorpe, with a much inferior force, defeated a Spanish military intrusion at the battle of Bloody Marsh on Saint Simon's Island, and then, by means of a stratagem, bluffed the Spanish into withdrawing to Florida.⁹

The distinguished American historian Daniel Boorstin has noted that the trustees' plan for Georgia could have applied to any border colony anywhere in the world. It was in fact an old Roman plan. "On each parcel of land... an able-bodied man should reside. Since there should be no gaps through which an enemy might penetrate, each man should possess only a small parcel of land. . . . To prevent speculation or emigration, the land should not salable."¹⁰ Boorstin was a critic of the Georgia settlement, calling its inhabitants "victims of philanthropy" because the Trustees laid down very specific plans for a land they had never seen, and their utopian vision ran directly afoul of American realities and human foibles. The rigidity of the trustees in insisting that their instructions be carried out did not allow any flexibility to meet the exigencies of real life in Georgia.

I

In 1735, the Associates of the late Dr. Bray laid plans to send a catechist to work with the Africans in Purysburgh, South Carolina, a Swiss settlement on the north bank of the Savannah River twenty-five miles above Savannah city, and just across the river from the new Salzburger village of Ebenezer. The Salzburgers had been evicted from their home by an intense religious cleansing in Austria begun by the new Catholic archbishop in 1729, a po-

⁹ Kenneth Coleman, *Colonial Georgia: A History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 55-73.

¹⁰ *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), 81.

grom which had evicted some 30,000 people by 1732. The first party, about eighty people, left Germany in October, 1733, and arrived in England in December. There they took oaths of allegiance and visited with the trustees. They embarked for America and were settled on a good healthy site by the end of March. A second contingent of sixty-five arrived the following year.¹¹ They were, along with the Moravians who had been forced to flee to Germany, precisely the kind of people Bray had in mind for Georgia. To the possible end of employing a Salzburger, the sum of £30 was set aside as an annual salary, but nothing came of the plan.

The success of the Salzburgers made the trustees open to similar groups, among them the Moravians. These too were persecuted continental Protestants, though their departure from Europe was not as much a matter of necessity as was that of the Salzburgers. Count von Zinzendorf and their theological leader, August Spangenberg, went to England to negotiate with the trustees in 1734 and a preliminary group of ten arrived in April, 1735. A second transport of about twenty-five arrived in February, 1736, having shared the voyage with the new minister for Savannah, the Rev. Mr. John Wesley, and his fellows.¹²

In 1737, someone among the Associates had the idea of using some of the Moravian Brethren as catechists. This, of course, had to be cleared through the highest channels. The Associates sent a delegation to the Archbishop of Canterbury “to desire his Grace’s opinion concerning the Church of the Moravian Brethren ‘till now at Hernhoute, and to know whether anything in their Doctrines was so far repugnant to those of the Church of England as to make it improper to employ some of the Brethren in instructing the Negroes in Christianity.”¹³ In due course, the Archbishop responded “that he had long been acquainted by Books with the Moravian Brethren, and that they were apostolical and Episcopal, not sustaining any doctrines repugnant to the thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England; and that he was confirmed in these sentiments of them by the Conferences he had lately had with the Count of Zinzendorf.”¹⁴ On receiving the committee’s report, the Associates directed that the £30 be set aside for Zinzendorf to use “for two Moravian Brethren to instruct the Negroes in Carolina.”¹⁵

Early in 1738, Zinzendorf’s designees arrived in England. They were Peter Böhler and George Schoeleus, each aged twenty-five. The Associates appropriated a subsistence allowance of 12 pence a day to sustain the pair until their sailing date in May.¹⁶ Their arrival coincided with the return of John Wesley from America. It was only a very short time before Wesley and

¹¹Coleman, 40-49; Kenneth Coleman and Milton Ready, eds. *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia*, XX (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 218-221.

¹²Coleman, 48.

¹³Minute Book, I, 16-17.

¹⁴Minute Book, I, 16-17.

¹⁵Minute Book, I, 17.

¹⁶Minute Book, I, 27.

Böhler met.

Wesley's ship docked at Deal and he left there on February 1, 1738, on his way to London to report to the Trustees of Georgia. He expected to have to explain his unauthorized departure from his work in Savannah and he also expected to tell them that conditions in Georgia were not good.¹⁷

On his way to London, he stopped with friends at Blendon and told them his story. They encouraged him to report his finding to the trustees at once. Among other things, he told them that "a few steps have been taken towards publishing glad tidings both to the African and American heathens."¹⁸ Obviously, a small beginning toward evangelizing Africans had begun—in South Carolina, of course, since slavery was forbidden in Georgia. On February 5, Wesley met with Oglethorpe in London and then preached at St. John the Evangelist's Church. A returned missionary would always be a welcome visitor to a church, but Wesley was told not to come back. Two days later, he met the party of Moravians just arrived from Germany. Among them were Böhler and his assistant, Schoeleus. Wesley arranged for lodgings for the men. Though Wesley had little German and Böhler spoke no English, the two educated men were able to converse in their common Latin and did so extensively. As Wesley said, "I did not willingly lose any opportunity of conversing with them while I stayed in London."¹⁹

One task that did prevent continual discussion was Wesley's duty to the trustees. After meeting again with Oglethorpe the day after he met the Moravians, he made a partial verbal report to the trustees. They did not much like what he had to say: he told them that many of the colonists were idlers and that their horticulturalist, who was supposed to be tending the mulberry trees for the silkworm industry, had left after a quarrel with Causton, Wesley's principal nemesis in Georgia. Wesley's dismal evaluation of the colony was not in accord with what they had been led to believe.²⁰

Like most groups, the trustees did not want to hear that their carefully laid plans were a failure. Wesley reiterated and expanded this in a written statement a week later, on February 15, and answered numerous questions. The Trustees liked it even less. Charles Wesley recorded the next day that Oglethorpe cautioned him: "your brother must have a care. There is a very strong spirit raising against him. People say he is here to do mischief to the colony. He will be called upon for his reasons why he left the colony."²¹ Wesley returned to London on February 22 and again on April 26 to meet with the Georgia trustees to defend his actions in the matter of abandoning his charge. But for the moment, that responsibility was at least partially

¹⁷ W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, XVIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 221-223.

¹⁸ Ward and Heitzenrater, 222.

¹⁹ Ward and Heitzenrater, 224.

²⁰ Ward and Heitzenrater, 224.

²¹ Thomas Jackson, ed. *The Journal of the Rev. Charles Wesley, M.A.*, I (reprinted from 1849 edition; Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Books House, 1980), 81.

discharged and Wesley traveled to Oxford in company with brother Charles and Böhler with religion as the main thing on his mind.

The story of Böhler's talks with the Wesley brothers is widely known. They were together on February 7, February 17-18, March 4-10, March 23, April 22-23, April 26, May 3-4 and perhaps other times. The young Böhler acted as spiritual tutor to the brothers, though he was several years their junior. He left them on the verge of a great spiritual awakening, an event that soon began for both of them, a part of which is called "Aldersgate." After March 2, John resolved "to speak no word which does not tend to the glory of God; in particular, not a tittle of worldly things."²² If John followed through on this impossible task, at least in the company of Böhler, then what information Böhler got from Wesley must have been related early in their acquaintance. There is little evidence in the journals that the two men spoke of America, but the journals relate to the spiritual crisis occurring in Wesley's life. Further, they were edited after the fact to include only that which Wesley thought relevant.

But there must have been some discussion about what Böhler could expect in America, if only in terms of the spiritual state of the colonies. If Böhler held the key to salvation for Wesley, Wesley held the key to America for Böhler. It strains the imagination beyond the breaking point to suppose that Wesley did not explain to Böhler what to expect, and that Böhler did not ask. Thus, we can imagine that this unrecorded report must have included something like the following lines of conversation:

Let me tell you, Peter, about what you can expect in America.

You will be working for the Associates of the Late Dr. Bray. You've already met them, I know. You have been approved by the Archbishop of Canterbury himself, who has read Moravian books and chatted with Zinzendorf. I understand he has approved you and Schoelius for work among the American negroes. The Associates have money to support you and Schoelius as you try to catechize the negroes. They'll expect regular reports. You will be in South Carolina, but the Associates of the Late Dr. Bray and the trustees of Georgia are the same people. They will want to hold you close to your appointed work.

You will have a lot to do with Mr. Oglethorpe, though he runs Georgia. He has close ties in South Carolina and the two colonies often cooperate on the strength of Oglethorpe's connections. He likes Anglicanism and has provided a home for persecuted continental Protestants like your own Moravians and the Salzburgers. He's a young man but very able. My brother Charles was his secretary for almost a year, as you perhaps know. In fact, Charles is thinking seriously about going back. Oglethorpe wants him to go and is even willing to hold a place for him until he feels better.

The Moravians and Salzburgers are an industrious lot, but you will get along well with them. The pastor at Ebenezer is named John Martin Bolzius, late of Halle. He is an able man and probably runs the place. The SPCK provides some funds and the Associates sent some books to him through me while I was there.

The Anglicans in Georgia are a hardhearted lot. They gave me a hard time. They think more about making headway financially than they do about their souls. Stay away from them if you can.

²² Ward and Heitzenrater, 227.

The Indians are like children, sometimes generous but also dangerous if riled. The ones along the coast, the Yamacraws, are all right, but others come from the interior occasionally. Charles was secretary of Indian Affairs and he can tell you more about them. Likewise, my colleague Benjamin Ingham worked among for a year. Your fellow Moravians at Irene, just up the river from Savannah, have done well among them. Old Tomochichi, chief of the Yamacraws, is a great friend. You'll need an interpreter if you want to work with them. But watch the interpreters—they may have their own agendas. Mary Musgrove is the best; she's an Indian married to an Englishman, but she takes care of herself first and other people's business second.

The negroes of South Carolina are nearly as savage. I've seen them in the coastal plantations and in Charleston and I've talked to folks who have visited among them, as well as to their owners. I tell you, it's an evil business and they are poor victims. They have trouble communicating, since many of them are native Africans from differing tribes. Their religion is animist or occasionally Muslim. Their lot is a pitiable one. The planters are outnumbered by the blacks, sometimes ten to one, so they keep a heavy boot on their necks. Planters often keep their families in Charleston and visit their plantations only irregularly. The blacks live mostly in the coastal swamp areas doing agricultural work. There are more men than women among them. Overall, there are about 30,000 African slaves compared with perhaps 15,000 whites in the colony. Of course, there are none in Georgia, though there may have been occasions in the early days when skilled sawyers were loaned to the Georgians temporarily. The trustees don't want them, because they might dilute the military aspect of the colony—keeping the Spanish in Florida where they belong. By the way, if the South Carolina planters decide that you are stirring up the blacks, they may run you off. I don't know if you will find many of them in Purysburgh—that's a little too far inland.

The climate is beastly hot and wet—terrible thunderstorms, mosquitoes, disease, the odd hurricane, swamps that make the fens look like desert. But there are new kinds of trees and plants and animals such as you never saw. One ugly creature, the opossum, gives birth and then tucks the newborns into a pouch on her abdomen and suckles them till they grow. Amazing! I know you are probably not interested but I found it all fascinating. There are some curative herbs and plants we could use over here. . . the Indians know a good bit about these.

The trip over scared me to death! I don't like sea voyages anyway, but there storms so terrible that it was only through God's grace that we didn't founder. It's no calm day's sail on the lake. Storms, gales, the ship too small, everybody throwing up. But your folks kept their cool and their nerve even when it looked like we were going to go down.

The Moravians impressed me immensely on the ship, even the children. I also got to know them rather well at Irene and Savannah, and even thought about joining—you folks seem to have it all together. But they didn't seem to think I was quite right with God so they encouraged me to continue to pray and to think about my salvation as an Anglican. Possibly they were concerned about repercussions if an Anglican priest left the fold on their account over in the colonies.

Now, tell me what you think about saving faith and instantaneous conversion and assurance and the witness of the spirit and the efficacy of the means of grace and all that. I know what the Scripture says, I know what the Christian fathers say, I have read some of Luther and Calvin, and I have talked to your fellow Moravians, but what do you say? . . . Are you sure about all that?

II

In May, 1738, Böhler and Schoeleus embarked for their tasks in America. They did not turn out to be very good correspondents. The Associates, hear-

ing nothing from the men, nevertheless dispatched another £30. After waiting for over a year to have some word from the two, the Associates resolved, “that Mr. Whitefield be desired to enquire what progress the two Moravian catechists have made who were recommended by Count Zinzendorf for converting the Negroes at Purysburgh and that Mr. Whitefield do send the associates an account of such inquiry as soon as possible.”²³ George Whitefield had been appointed to the living of Savannah and was making plans to depart for Georgia. As a frequent visitor at the Moravian meetings in London, Whitefield was an ideal choice for this task, for he could put the message to the catechists with authority and love.

Whitefield evidently had some success, for a letter in June, 1740, arrived from Böhler. He acknowledged receipt of the money and reported that Schoeleus had died, but did not give much information about what they had done.²⁴ The Associates appropriated another £30 for the work and sent it to Oglethorpe, but it was not to be paid to Böhler until Oglethorpe could get him to write a more detailed account of his work with the Negroes, so “that it may appear he shall deserve from the Associates as allowance toward his subsistence before the same is paid out of the Associates’ money.”²⁵ In defense of Böhler, he and Schoeleus found there were very few, if any, Africans in Purrysburgh. Indeed, they requested permission to transfer their efforts to the more fertile ground of Charleston, but Oglethorpe refused to allow them to make the change.

By this time, Böhler had decided that South Carolina was not the place for him. Georgia held about the same opinion regarding the Moravians. In a quasi-military colony, there was little room for pacifists and the other settlers resented the fact that they had to risk their lives for the benefit of the Moravians. The Moravians did not appreciate being pushed on this issue. They had been promised religious freedom.²⁶ So, in April, 1740, Böhler sailed with most of the Moravians to join some of their compatriots already settled in Pennsylvania. Quaker Pennsylvania was a more congenial spiritual and cultural climate for them. This made moot the Associates’ concern that Oglethorpe not give Böhler any more money.²⁷

Böhler and Wesley met again in London in 1741. Böhler’s old authority and charm asserted itself and Wesley felt himself again coming under the Moravian spell. But this was a different John Wesley from the troubled, confused, battered soul of May, 1738. He had studied the Moravian doctrines more thoroughly, had visited Herrnhut, had debated Zinzendorf and

²³ Minute Book, I, 35.

²⁴ Minute Book, I, 40.

²⁵ Minute Book, I, 40.

²⁶ Willie Snow Ethridge, *Strange Fires; the True Story of John Wesley’s Love Affair in Georgia* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1971), 182-184.

²⁷ John C. Van Horne, ed., *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery: The American Correspondence of the Associates of the Late Dr. Bray, 1717-1777* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 18-19.

Spangenberg, and had solidified and confirmed his Anglican roots. He had found what he believed to be flaws in Moravian doctrine and was quick to point them out. This time, he met Böhler as an equal, and the two men agreed, while continuing to love each other, to disagree. This time, there was little that either man was able to teach the other.²⁸

²⁸ Herbert McGonigle, *John Wesley and the Moravians* (n.p.: The Wesley Fellowship, 1993), 19-20.