



Portrait of Peter Böhler, by John Valentine Haidt, courtesy of the Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Peter Böhler

After Aldersgate

Albert F. Jordan (1962)

Editor's Note: the following article was discovered among papers in our archive. It was submitted to the denominational magazine Together, in advance of the 225th anniversary of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience of 1738, but was not published. The author, Albert F. Jordan (1901-1975), was a member of Wesley United Methodist Church in Bethlehem, where he taught Sunday school for 44 years. Trained as a civil engineer, Jordan worked many years for Bethlehem Steel, and wrote a number of articles about Moravianism and its connections to Methodism; his papers are housed at the Moravian Historical Society in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

It is inevitable that every writer of Methodist history mentions Peter Böhler. John and Charles Wesley had association with Bishop Nitschmann and other Moravians in Georgia, and had been impressed by their practical piety. John Wesley had newly returned from Georgia, while Peter Böhler had newly arrived in London. The former was a discouraged young clergyman of the established church of England, the latter a newly ordained Presbyterian in the Moravian Church. It was their meeting in London which eventually led to that event on May 24, 1738, which is referred to as John Wesley's heartwarming experience. Many writers have led the reader through the days from February 7, 1738 to May 24, 1738, but few have followed Peter Böhler, the instrument in both John and Charles Wesley's religious experience, beyond this period. The report of Böhler's life, which follows, is an effort to carry our knowledge of him from this early London period to the close of his life. This data has been drawn freely from material preserved at the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem Pennsylvania, and is herewith gratefully acknowledged.

It was May 4, 1738, that Peter Böhler left London to carry out his assignment as a missionary among the slaves in South Carolina. He had been ordained by Count Zinzendorf and Bishop Nitschmann the previous December 15, and had arrived in London to await a ship going to his new location. It was during his brief stay in England, from February 7, 1738 to May 4, 1738, that his influence was felt by John and Charles Wesley, guiding them into the full light of the Gospel.

Peter Böhler's missionary efforts produced only limited results in South Carolina. He and the handful of Moravians were discouraged because of the sparcity of results and the unfriendliness of their neighbors due to their refusal to bear arms – a war between England and Spain having broken out. Thus they found George Whitefield's arrival at Savannah on New Year's Day, 1740, and his subsequent offer to take them to Philadelphia on his sloop, most welcome.

This small band of Moravians arrived with George Whitefield in Philadelphia April 25, 1740. It is not surprising that Whitefield and Böhler, both having a message for the hearts of men, met in the homes of Wiegner and Antes, friends of the Moravians located near Philadelphia, where they held joint services, Whitefield giving an English address Böhler speaking German. It was here Whitefield entered into an agreement with Böhler and the other Moravians to locate a place for a Negro school on 5,000 acres which he had just purchased and arranged for Böhler to supervise the erection of the building. Upon returning to Philadelphia to report to Whitefield, Böhler had a falling out over a question of doctrine and he and his workers were ordered off the property which Whitefield had purchased. There was reconciliation however, and work was continued. In July 1741, Whitefield found himself in financial straits and sold this property to the Moravians. The building which was begun is now known as the Whitefield House, and is located in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, along with a log cabin built at that time.

Whitefield had written to Böhler from London in January 20, 1739, as he looked forward to seeing Böhler, "I hope to be refreshed by your powerful exhortations & instructed more perfectly in that comfortable Doctrine, I mean in being freely justified from all our sins by faith, which is in Jesus." But only a short time later Böhler felt the need to write Whitefield, "Christ gave himself a ransom for all," as Whitefield propounded the doctrine of reprobation.

In January 1741, Peter Böhler returned to Europe. It was during this visit to England that he, too, became part of the religious awakening that was sweeping that country and preached often to "1,000 hearers,



The Whitefield House, in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, on the tract of land the evangelist purchased in 1740. Peter Böhler was engaged to survey the land, and begin construction of the building, intended as an orphanage and school for black children.

sometimes 4,000.” It was during this period that John Wesley and Count Zinzendorf discussed each other’s religious views, and each became firmly convinced the other was wrong. Wesley emphasized perfection and holiness; Zinzendorf placed his emphasis on salvation by faith alone. It was at this point that Methodists and Moravians went their separate ways and Böhler followed the trend of his church. At an earlier date, soon after his Aldergate experience, John Wesley had visited the Count and thought seriously of joining with the Moravians. The breach between these two religious groups was never mended, but resulted in two separate denominations. Böhler wrote to Whitefield expressing his personal feeling, “I am indeed really sorry that there ever has happened such a division between you, my dear John Wesley and us, so that we almost are now three parties, although we are servants of the same Master. O, that the Lord would heal this breach!”

On June 7, 1742, Peter Böhler returned to Philadelphia with 57 people, who had been organized on shipboard as a congregation with Böhler as chaplain. This was called the 1st Sea Congregation by the Moravians. Among the passengers was Elizabeth Hopson Böhler, whom he had married in London. This English woman was of constant assistance to her husband as he performed his pastoral duties.

Near the end of the year Böhler accompanied Count Zinzendorf to New York for his departure to Europe. Several residents invited Böhler to remain in the area for a few weeks and preach to them. This he agreed to do. It was here he reported in his diary on January 18, 1743, "I had an English service for the first time." During this period he had services and preached on eight different occasions and, though at first his hearers were restless they later became very attentive and "were greatly blessed." In the afternoon of January 31, 1743, the constable called on him and ordered him and the men with him before the mayor and six aldermen. These questioned Böhler at length and finally ordered him and those with him to leave the city.

Count Zinzendorf developed and organized what was known as the Pennsylvania Synod. Though he was not its originator, he was its dominant figure during 1742. The next year Peter Böhler took over its supervision. This was an early effort to establish a union of churches in America, and was thought of as the Church of God in Spirit. There were Lutherans, Reformed, Mennonites, Schwenkfelders, Moravians, Seventh-Day Baptists, Separatists, and others present. Its purpose was to have the various denominations minimize their differences and emphasize that which they had in common.¹ Though it was primarily a German project, a document dated May 1743, is the petition of an English congregation to the Synod meeting in Philadelphia that it be received as a Congregation of Christ. This document bears the initials P.B. and E.B., presumably those of Peter Böhler and his wife, also names which were among those in the 1st Sea Congregation.²

¹See John J. Stoudt, "Count Zinzendorf and the Pennsylvania Congregation of God in the Spirit, The First American Oecumenical Movement," in *Church History* 9 (Dec. 1940), 366-380.

²This petition was undoubtedly from Philadelphia's First Moravian Church, founded in 1742, and dominated in its early years by English-speaking converts. See Paul T. Warner, "History of the First Moravian Church in Philadelphia Pa." in *Transactions of the Moravian Historical Society* 13 (1942), 65, 68; and John W. Jordan, *Bits of History in the First Decade of the Moravian Church in Philadelphia, 1743-1749* (handwritten volume, 1892), in the Moravian Historical Society, Nazareth, Pennsylvania; 3-4.



Left: Moravian leader Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), who came to the colonies in December 1741. Right: an engraving of Peter Böhler.

In April of 1745, Peter Böhler again took ship in New York for Europe. He had been in charge of the field of operations of the Moravians in America and had been relieved by Bishop Spangenberg who had returned to America in 1744. Böhler's journey to Europe on the ship *Queen of Hungary* is marked by the fact that the ship was captured by French privateers and all on board were taken to France. Since the Moravians were Germans they were not made prisoners of war but given the liberty to proceed to Germany. They retained almost all of their papers and reports. Böhler wrote a letter to the Huttons in England explaining his whereabouts and alaying concern over their not having arrived in England. He went to England several times and in between was connected with the seminary at Marienborn in Germany. On the 10th of January 1748, he was consecrated a Bishop and returned to England where he superintended the Moravian Church until 1753.

Bishop Spangenberg arrived in England in May of 1753 to report to Count Zinzendorf regarding the territory in North Carolina which had been offered to the Brethren. He must also have had a report on the

financial difficulties that beset the Moravians in the colonies, because Peter Böhler was soon thereafter sent to America, arriving in New York on September 9, 1753. A lengthy memorandum was sent to him in America on June 30, 1753. Peter Böhler had sailed from Portsmouth on June 19, and this document (with 73 numbered items) touched the complete field of operations of the Moravians in America, placing it in his care. By the time Bishop Spangenberg returned to Pennsylvania at Easter time 1754, Böhler had stabilized the financial structure of the church and had faithfully attended to the other affairs of his office. He expected to return to Europe but no word of invitation came. He finally located in New York City, officiating as pastor of the Moravian Church there. However, he finally received word to come to Europe, and sailed for England on August 28, 1755, continuing on to Germany where he remained for about six months. He then returned to America where he was to be the assistant to Bishop Spangenberg until 1764. In that year, Böhler left America for the last time, returning to Germany to help in the organization of the Moravian Church, which was necessary following the death of Count Zinzendorf in 1760. He was elected to the Directory and later to the Elder's Conference.

Peter Böhler made official visits to England. On his last visit, while he was preparing to hold a service in the Chapel of Fetter Lane, he was stricken, and on April 27, 1775, he passed on to his reward.

From the church in London came the report that Reverend Latrobe had held the funeral service for the departed Peter Böhler, who was buried May 1, 1775. The daily reading for his last birthday was the text for his funeral service: "*Be always ready, for the Son of Man cometh at an hour when we do not expect him.*"

His earthly remains are in the small cemetery at Chelsea, England; a small chapel is close by. The flat stone on his grave gives no hint of the influence and service of this man of faith.