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**PETER BÖHLER (1712-1775)
EVANGELIST TO JOHN AND CHARLES WESLEY**

By David Hilton

At the end of January 1738, after successful evangelistic preaching in England, George Whitefield (1714-1770) set sail for Georgia. At the same time, John Wesley (1703-1791) returned from his failed mission in Georgia to England, asking the question, *'I went to America to convert the Indians, but oh, who shall convert me?'* Charles Wesley (1707-1788) had returned to England from Georgia as a sick young man on 3 December 1736.

During 1737 Charles had witnessed the progress of revival under the preaching of his young friend, George Whitefield. James Hervey wrote of Whitefield's ministry: *'All London and the whole nation tell of the great things of God done by his ministry.'*

John and Charles Wesley were staying in London at the home of the parents of James Hutton. On 7 February 1738 Hutton took the brothers to the home of Weinantz, a Dutch merchant, in order to meet a group of Moravian Christians who had just arrived that day in London *en route* to America. The pastor of this group was a 26-year-old gifted and highly intelligent man, Peter Böhler.

Böhler was born on 31 December 1712, the son of a brewer, at Frankfurt-on-Main. He went to Jena University in 1731, where he attended some lectures by Moravian leaders, Count von Zinzendorf and A G Spangenberg. Böhler was encouraged to read books by Philip Spener and other Pietists. He had an instantaneous conversion and joined the Moravians. After acting as academic tutor to Zinzendorf's son, he was ordained and commissioned to ministry in Savannah, Georgia.

From 7 February till 4 May, Böhler would spend much time in discussing the Christian faith with John and Charles Wesley, where Böhler successfully filled the role of evangelist and spiritual mentor. John and Charles could not help but compare their own spiritual depression with Böhler's deep sense of Christian peace. Böhler talked to them about the necessity of prayer and faith. He urged them to focus less on what they wanted to achieve for God, and more on what God could do for them.

Böhler was convinced that John did not have a personal trust in Christ for salvation but was open to be taught the way of faith. He thought that Charles needed to stop viewing himself as being so worthless as to be beyond God's grace. Charles *'is very much distressed in mind and does not know how he shall begin to be acquainted with the Saviour.'*

Böhler thought that High Church Anglicans in general placed too much emphasis on their ordination and their church liturgy. Like Bunyan before him, Böhler could not understand why they insisted on praying 'from the printed book.' He encouraged John to pray and preach extempore, in the Spirit. He believed that Christians should speak with plain simplicity. Böhler was eager to organise small groups of Christians for intensive fellowship and mutual examination of the soul.

On 17 February Charles and John took Böhler to Oxford to meet some of their friends. John rapidly returned to London, leaving Charles to show Böhler round the university, spending considerable time debating the nature of faith. After a week, Charles fell seriously ill. Böhler prayed at Charles' bedside for his recovery, then taking his hand he calmly said, *'You will not die now.'*

Böhler asked Charles whether he hoped to be one of the saved. Charles replied that he had used his best endeavours to serve God, believing, as John also did, that salvation needed to be earned. Charles's fear of death at that time confirmed for him that he was not a reborn Christian.

Due to Charles's illness, John took over as Böhler's chief companion, and thus received the brunt of Böhler's probing questions. The Moravians believed that true Christian faith was always accompanied by joy, peace and love. The Holy Spirit is received as a spirit of sonship or adoption, not as a spirit of bondage and fear. John recognized that he did not have such a faith.

Böhler told John, *'that philosophy of yours must be purged away,'* since John was in the habit of applying logic to new ideas which he heard, and which disturbed him. By 8 March John acknowledged that Böhler had convinced him of his unbelief, *'the want of that faith whereby alone we are saved.'* John said that he should stop preaching since he lacked true faith. Böhler advised him to *'preach faith till you have it, and then because you have it you will preach faith.'*

John decided to put Böhler's advice to the test. He visited Oxford prison and consoled William Clifford, who was about to be hanged for assault, burglary and desertion from the army. John prayed extempore that Clifford should be saved by God's grace. Clifford responded positively: *'I am now ready to die. I know Christ has taken away my sins, and there is no more condemnation for me.'* John noted, *'in his last moments he was enjoying a perfect peace.'*

From Oxford John travelled with Charles Kinchin to Manchester. *En route* he tested out preaching on the necessity of saving faith. John was surprised to see how this message often led to a deep-seated emotional response in the hearers. In St Anne's Church, Manchester, John preached from the text: *'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.'*

Towards the end of March 1738, John returned to Oxford. There, with Böhler and a partially recovered Charles Wesley, they held further discussions on the nature of faith. By April 1738 John discovered support for Böhler's teaching in the Anglican *'Homily on Salvation'*, which spoke of *'A sure trust and confidence which a man hath in God that through the merits of Christ his sins are forgiven and he be reconciled to the favour of God.'* John Wesley had difficulty accepting that conversion can often be instantaneous, but eventually accepted that this was the case from examples in Scripture and from the testimonies of the Moravians.

On 1 May 1738 Böhler and Wesley and others founded a religious society, which would later meet at Fetter Lane in London, adopting a mixture of Anglican and Moravian practices. Some of John's 'Methodist' friends were concerned that John was both praying and preaching extempore, a sign that the former high churchman was starting to resemble a Cromwellian enthusiast. John Clayton told him to abandon extempore preaching in which *'few or none were edified.'* The parents of James Hutton and Charles Delamotte expressed concern that John was becoming *'a religious extremist.'* For a short time Charles Wesley turned against Böhler's views on instantaneous conversion, and argued the point with John.

On 28 April Charles was struck down again with pleurisy. Böhler visited Charles and prayed for him that he *'might see the divine intention in this and my late illness.'* This led Charles to reconsider Böhler's doctrine of faith. He went through a spiritual crisis before finally accepting that salvation came entirely through God's grace. He turned to God:

'Speak, gracious Lord, my sickness cure,
Make my infected nature pure,
Peace, righteousness, and joy impart,
And pour Thyself into my heart.'

On 4 May 1738 Peter Böhler left to commence his voyage to America. Charles found Böhler's departure difficult because he had not yet resolved all his spiritual uncertainties.

James Hutton's parents offered to look after Charles. He knew that they were hostile to Böhler's views, as they had expressed their disagreement when John or Charles talked of not being real Christians yet. Charles chose to stay with John Bray, a brazier from the Fetter Lane Society. Charles believed that Bray's simple faith was exactly what he needed to supply Peter Böhler's place.'

On 17 May William Holland brought Charles a copy of Martin Luther's book on 'Galatians.' This showed that Böhler's views were those of Luther. Charles was 'astonished' that he had ever viewed Böhler's ideas as 'new.'

Meanwhile, on 14 May 1738, John Wesley had written an impolite letter of complaint to William Law, author of '*A Practical Treatise upon Christian Perfection*' and '*A Serious Call to a Holy and Devout Life*.' Previously, he had regarded Law as his spiritual mentor, but now he regarded Böhler as more helpful to him. He refers to Böhler as a '*holy man*' who taught him to believe and be saved, strip oneself of one's own works and righteousness and fly to Christ. Why had Law not given him this Scriptural advice nor spoken of faith in the blood of Christ? Wesley challenged Law about his '*sourness of behaviour*.' How can this possibly be '*the fruit of a living faith in Christ?*'

On 19 May 1738 news reached John that his brother Charles had been converted, '*at peace with God, and rejoicing in the hope of Christ*.' In his Journal for 24 May John wrote that Bohler had convinced him that '*a true and living faith is inseparable from a sense of pardon for all past and freedom from all present sins*.'

Hearing a reading from Luther's preface to his commentary on Romans at Aldersgate Street religious society, John said, '*I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ and Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death*.'

Over the next few years John and Charles Wesley clashed doctrinally with other Moravian leaders, but they regarded Peter Böhler as a faithful evangelist and spiritual adviser. Gordon Rupp called Bohler '*the Evangelist in John Wesley's Pilgrim's Progress*.' Böhler's witness from 7 February to 4 May 1738 laid the foundation for the revival ministry of John and Charles Wesley. John later said of Böhler: '*O what a work hath God begun since his coming to England!*'

In Georgia, Peter Böhler built a school for children on land given by George Whitefield. From 1741 he ministered to growing Moravian congregations in London and West Yorkshire. He married an English woman, Elizabeth Hobson, and four children were born between 1743 and 1751.

In 1748 Böhler was consecrated as a Moravian bishop. He had a good reputation as an able administrator, as well as a preacher and pastor. He ministered in the American colonies, including at New York, and then in Germany. He died on 27 April 1775, aged 63, after a stroke.

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