

JOHN WESLEY, CHILDREN, AND THE MISSION OF GOD

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This article considers John Wesley's belief that children should be given high priority in the church's mission. Wesley's views on education and how he implemented them are considered and placed alongside recent research in order to inform the shape and nature of ministry to, and with, children in the twenty-first century. It is argued that the low view of children in matters of faith development that underlies present practice is not an appropriate view for those who seek to work in concert with God's mission.

But what shall we do for the rising generation? Unless we take care of this, the present revival will be *res unius aetatis*; it will last only the age of a man. Who will labour herein? Let him that is zealous for God and the souls of men begin now.

(1.) Where there are ten children in a society, meet them at least an hour every week.

(2.) Talk with them every time you see any at home.

(3.) Pray in earnest for them.

(4.) Diligently instruct and vehemently exhort all parents at their own houses.

(5.) Preach expressly on education, particularly at Midsummer, when you speak of Kingswood. 'But I have no gift for this.' Gift or no gift, you are to do it; else you are not called to be a Methodist Preacher. Do it as you can, till you can do it as you would. Pray earnestly for the gift, and use the means for it. Pray earnestly for the gift, and use the means for it. Particularly, study the 'Instructions' and 'Lessons for Children.'¹

With these words John Wesley reflected the priority that he placed on the training and educating of children ('the rising generation') in the love and knowledge of God. Such was the priority he placed on this that he saw it as a vital role for Methodist preachers and he questioned the calling of those who would argue that doing so was not their role.

¹John Wesley, 'Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others; From the Year 1744, to the Year 1789,' in *The Works of John Wesley, Vol 8: Addresses, Essays, and Letters*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), question 33, 315–16. All references to Wesley's *Works* in this article are to the Jackson edition.

This article seeks to advance discussion on the shape and nature of ministry to and with children in the twenty-first century. It considers Wesley's work with children in order to inform the church's present ministry and asks what it might mean to place the same priority on the evangelism and discipleship of children as he did. I hope that this paper and my earlier work – 'as a little Child: Children in the Theology of John Wesley'² will provide a base from which further thought and work can be undertaken on this vital area of the life of God's church and of the Kingdom of God.

I. Wesley, Children and the Mission of God

Given the scarcity of literature on the subject one would be forgiven for thinking that John Wesley had little interest in children. Relatively little has been written about the time he spent with children, of the schools he set up, of the 1,729 pages of textbooks that he edited and wrote, of the many instances where he wrote of the faith, prayerfulness and evangelistic ministry of children. Yet his journals, sermons and letters are full of references to children and it is clear that he had a deep and abiding love for and interest in them. Clearly they held a special place in his heart and for him it was vital that their salvation and education in the knowledge and love of God should be a priority in the life and work of the church.

In Wesley's sermon 'On Family Religion,' based on Joshua's declaration in Joshua 24:15, 'as for me and my house we will serve the Lord,' written sometime after 1779 and not long before his death, he wrote:

What will the consequence be...If family religion be neglected? If care be not taken of the rising generation? Will not the present revival of religion in a short time die away? Will it not be as the historian speaks of the Roman state in its infancy, *res unius aetatis*, an event that has its beginning and end within the space of one generation? Will it not be a confirmation of that melancholy remark of Luther's that 'a revival of religion never lasts longer than one generation?' By a generation (as he explains himself) he means thirty years. But, blessed be God, this remark does not hold. With regard to the present instance; seeing this revival, from its rise in the year 1729, has already lasted above fifty years.³

²Peter Benzie, 'as a Little Child: Children in the Theology of John Wesley,' MA thesis, Laidlaw-Carey Graduate School, 2010.

³ John Wesley, Sermon 94, 'On Family Religion', in *Works Vol 7*, para. 3, 77.

Clearly Wesley was concerned that the then current revival, during which so many had been brought to the point of exercising justifying faith and been born again, should continue. He was also clear that for that to happen the church must, whilst recognising that salvation is always a work of God's divine grace, do its part by giving priority to teaching children about the love of God. He saw it as the Church's responsibility to introduce children to Christ so that they can accept God's justifying grace through exercising saving faith.

The priority Wesley placed on evangelising and discipling children is well illustrated by his endeavours in the field of education. Not only did he have an abiding interest in education but he exerted considerable influence on it in the eighteenth century and beyond.⁴ This is indeed one of his legacies. He was an educator, a voice for educational reform who was totally committed to ensuring that children were provided with at least the opportunity of a basic education.⁵ He was also committed to ensuring that the education children received was of high quality in order that the aim of education as he saw it (Christian perfection) could be achieved.⁶

II. Implementation of Beliefs

Wesley's interest in the education of children can be traced to the 1720s when he began to financially support the Grey Coat School in Oxford. Then in 1739 when the first purpose-built Methodist meeting hall was built on land he obtained in the Horse Fair, Bristol he ensured that it served as a school for local children alongside its being an indoor preaching place for the local societies.⁷

Wesley gave the education of children a high priority as an outworking of his primary interest in bringing people to faith and his call to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land.⁸ And so education for Wesley was not the secular education we know today.

⁴ Green, for instance, notes that Kingswood school was possibly Wesley's greatest interest throughout his life. V.H.H. Green, *John Wesley* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964), 135.

⁵James Riley Estep Jr., 'John Wesley's Philosophy of Formal Childhood Education,' *Christian Education Journal* 1, no. 2 (1997): 43. Whilst our discussion here focuses on the child we note that for Wesley education was a lifelong process so that what applies to the child also applies to the adult.

⁶John Wesley, Sermon 95, 'On the Education of Children,' in *Works Vol 7*: 87–88.

⁷Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 75.

⁸Wesley, 'Minutes of Several Conversations,' question 3, 299.

In his schools he required that every boy undertook a course of study in reading, writing, arithmetic, English history, geography, chronology, rhetoric, logic, ethics, geometry, algebra and physics - but he was more concerned that children were enabled and empowered to live lives of Scriptural Holiness – Loving God with all the heart, soul and mind, and one’s neighbour as oneself.⁹ Education for Wesley, then, had more in common with what we might call religious education as he saw the aim of education as being to equip the child to live in both this world and in eternity in right relationship with God.¹⁰

III. Why Teach?

For Wesley education was the responsibility of parents as well as school teachers. He firmly held to the belief that parents in particular should follow the scriptural command to start children off on the way they should go, so that even when they were old they would not turn from it (Proverbs 22:6). It is in his sermon *On Family Religion* that we get the most comprehensive picture of his views in this regard as it is here that he expounded on why this scripture is true. It is also here that he explained to parents how they can best ensure that they achieve the outcome God promises in the text. Here he noted the bad consequences for the children of those parents who, whilst having their own personal relationship with Christ, fail to adequately teach their children the knowledge and love of God. These children either never enter into a personal relationship with Christ or if they do they backslide. Consequently their behaviour is sinful.¹¹

Once the children were old enough to go to school Wesley believed that the primary responsibility for their education shifted from the parents to school teachers.¹² And this is where he struck a problem because he was scathing in his criticism of the state of eighteenth century schools, which from his research and

⁹ Matt 22:37, 39; cf. Mark 12: 30-31 and Luke 10:27.

¹⁰ Wesley, Sermon 94, 'On Family Religion,' para. 13, 83.

¹¹ Wesley, Sermon 94, 'On Family Religion,' para. 4, 77.

¹² Wesley, Sermon 94, 'On Family Religion,' sec. III. 3–15, 80–83. Given that Kingswood School, which Wesley founded, catered for boys from six years of age we can surmise that Wesley saw parents as having primary teaching responsibility up until that age. John Wesley, 'A Short Account of the School in Kingswood, Near Bristol [Published in the Year 1768],' in *Works Vol 13: Letters*, para. 2, 283.

conversation with others, he had identified as failing to accomplish what he was convinced was the aim of education.¹³

Wesley first sought to find existing schools which measured up to his standards. Finding none he founded Kingswood School in 1748.¹⁴ Here, as in the other schools he set up, religious education was paramount, with Kingswood School, for instance, being one which for him 'was to be a model Christian institution, which would not disgrace the apostolic age.'¹⁵ Green asserts that Kingswood School was possibly Wesley's greatest interest throughout his life. The numerous references to it in his *Works* support this view.¹⁶ He seems to have visited the school on at least most occasions when he was in the area, often preaching to the children.¹⁷ The last journal entry in which he records having visited the school is of particular significance as it was for 11 September 1789 - less than eighteen months before his death. Not only does the school appear frequently in his journal entries; he also wrote three substantive papers where Kingswood was the subject matter.¹⁸

¹³Wesley, Sermon 95, 'On the Education of Children,' para. 3, 87–88.

¹⁴John Wesley, 'A Plain Account of Kingswood School [Printed in the Year 1781],' *Works Vol 13: Letters*, para. 8, 292; John Wesley, 'Journal Entry for June 24, 1748,' in *Works Vol 2: Journals from December 2, 1745 to May 5, 1760*, 101. Note – while Wesley clearly states that he founded Kingswood School there is some dispute among scholars as to whether this was in fact the case or whether he merely took over a school founded by George Whitefield.

¹⁵Cited in Elmer L. Towns, 'John Wesley and Religious Education,' *Religious Education* 65:4 (July 1970): 326.

¹⁶The index to the fourteen volumes of the Jackson edition of Wesley's *Works* lists more than seventy references to Kingswood School. See also John Wesley, 'Abridgments of Various Works: Instructions for Children (3rd Edition) [1747],' in *Works Vol 14: Grammars, Musical Works, Letters and Indexes*, 443.

¹⁷See for instance John Wesley, 'Journal Entry for March 15, 1744,' in *Works Vol 1: Journals from October 14, 1735 to November 29, 1745*, 457; John Wesley, 'Journal Entry for March 14, 1749,' in *Works Vol 2: Journals from December 2, 1745 to May 5, 1760*, 129; John Wesley, 'Journal Entry for September 6, 1771,' in *Works of John Wesley, Vol 3: Journals from May 6, 1760 to September 12, 1773*, 442; John Wesley, 'Journal Entry for March 15, 1782,' in *Works Vol 4: Journals from September 13, 1773 to October 24, 1790*, 222; John Wesley, 'Journal Entry for September 11, 1789,' in *Works Vol 4: Journals from September 13, 1773 to October 24, 1790*, 471.

¹⁸Wesley, 'A Short Account of Kingswood School,' 283–89; 'A Plain Account of Kingswood School,' 289–301; 'Remarks on the State of Kingswood School [1783],' in *Works Vol 13: Letters*, 301–302.

IV. Whom to Teach?

The maximum age for admission to Kingswood was twelve (the minimum was six). It was Wesley's belief that before that age the bias towards sin inherent in all people from birth as a result of the fall had not completely taken root and hence there was the possibility that through education this bias could be corrected and the child turned toward God.¹⁹ It was also Wesley's contention that a child's worldview was more capable of being changed before the age of thirteen.

Two hundred years later George Barna's research led him to the same conclusion, demonstrating that the religious beliefs a person develops by the age of thirteen are pretty much the set of beliefs they will maintain until they die, and that people's major spiritual choices are generally made when they are young.²⁰ A maximum admission age of twelve also accords with Wesley's belief that by the age of thirteen a person must have accepted God's gift of faith.²¹ I suggest that he assumed that if a child had not chosen to accept God's gift of faith by then they had effectively chosen not to have a relationship with God and as such had ruled themselves ineligible to receive an education designed to empower them to live holy lives.

V. Taught by Whom?

In order to ensure that education empowered children to live holy lives, Wesley was adamant that teachers needed to do more than express concern about developing children's faith; they had to do something about it otherwise they would do more damage than good.²² So concerned was he that the chance of children being educated in the love and knowledge of God should be maximised that he placed more importance on teachers' spirituality than on their skill in teaching. Indeed it was on this that he judged the

¹⁹Wesley, 'A Short Account of Kingswood School', para. 2, 283; Wesley, 'A Plain Account of Kingswood School,' para. 10, 293.

²⁰Sue Miller and David Staal, *Making Your Children's Ministry the Best Hour of Every Kid's Week* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 11.

²¹John Wesley, 'Journal Entry for April 29, 1759,' in *Works Vol 2: Journals from December 2, 1745 to May 5, 1760*, 477–78.

²²Wesley, 'A Plain Account of Kingswood School,' para. 5, 290–91; John Wesley, 'A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children [Printed in the Year 1783],' in *Works Vol 13: Letters*, para. 4, 475.

suitability of applicants for both teaching positions and the role of Headmaster at his schools.²³

Despite his advantage of being acquainted with many fine teachers, gained from his extensive travels throughout the length and breadth of England, Wesley found it more difficult than he expected to find suitable teachers for Kingswood. He was not prepared to compromise his standards however and waited to appoint teachers until he found those who had a God-given passion for teaching children, whose motive for teaching was purely to glorify God, and who met his high standards with respect to their own spirituality.²⁴ What a contrast this is to those churches today who, finding they need someone in Children's Ministry, give no real thought to whether that person has the gifts, passion or ability to work in this vital area of the work of the church and just appoint anyone so there is at least 'someone there.'

VI. How to Teach?

This concern with the spirituality of teachers was echoed in the expectations he had of his preachers. For instance he required them to visit each home.²⁵ Whilst there they were to give the children the tract *Instructions for Children* ensuring that the children learnt all it contained by heart. This was to be done through the use of encouragement.²⁶ Additionally each preacher, having spoken with the members of the household as a group, was also required to spend individual time with each person, including children, in a separate room. For this one-on-one time with the children Wesley laid out a very particular methodology for his preachers to follow. By adhering to it the preacher could be satisfied that the child understood what he or she was learning. It is here that we see what some may think is an uncharacteristically deep compassion for children as he instructed his preachers on ways not only to elicit the child's responses but also how to ensure the child did not get too stressed by the exercise and hence discouraged. One example he

²³John Wesley, 'Letter to Mr. Richard Tompson (dated August 2, 1745),' in *Works Vol 12: Letters*, para. 9, 292. and John Wesley, *Methodist Magazine* (1876), 324, as cited by Elmer L. Towns, 'John Wesley (1703-1791),' in *A History of Religious Educators*, ed. Elmer L. Towns (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 222. as quoted in Estep Jr., 'John Wesley's Philosophy of Formal Childhood Education,' 50.

²⁴Wesley, 'A Plain Account of Kingswood School,' para. 8, 292.

²⁵Wesley, 'Minutes of Several Conversations,' 299 n.

²⁶Wesley, 'Minutes of Several Conversations,' question 13, 305; question 33, 315.

gives, for instance, is to answer the question for the child thereby relieving the child of the stress of answering.²⁷

With the methodology he outlined Wesley was confident his preachers could be sure that the child knew God's role in the world, as well as in their lives, and most importantly that they understood the way of salvation. To reinforce the desirability of the latter he required that this session conclude with an exhortation designed to convince the child that they needed to be born again and that they needed to avoid sin in the future.²⁸

VII. Where to from Here?

How does this help us in ministry in the South Pacific? How does Wesley's ministry to children over two hundred years ago in a relatively mono-ethnic and mono-cultural society on the other side of the world where Christianity was the norm help us who are ministering and working in the twenty-first century - in a world which is vastly different in many ways and where we are ministering and working in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural context where secularism is increasingly the norm? The answer becomes clear when we read these words that Wesley wrote in his journal on 8 June, 1784. 'God begins his work in children. Thus it has been also in Cornwall, Manchester, and Epworth. Thus the flame spreads to those of riper years; till at length they all know him, and praise him from the least unto the greatest.'²⁹

Wesley's conviction has been confirmed by recent research. A survey conducted by the Barna Group in 2009 provides new insights into the age-old question – What is the long term effect of spiritual activity among children and teens? The survey asked adults to think back on their upbringing and to describe the frequency of their involvement in children and youth ministry. The Barna researchers then compared those reported early-life behaviours with the respondents' current levels of faith activity and faith resilience. What they found was that those who had attended children or youth ministry programs were much more likely to attend church and much more likely to have an active faith as adults than those who hadn't. For instance, among those who frequently attended such

²⁷ Wesley, 'Minutes of Several Conversations,' question 13, 305–7.

²⁸ Wesley, 'Minutes of Several Conversations,' question 13, 305–6.

²⁹ John Wesley, Journal Entry for June 8, 1784 in *Works of John Wesley, Vol 4: Journals from September 13, 1773 to October 24, 1790*, 279.

programs, half said they had attended a worship service in the last week, which is slightly higher than the United States national average and well ahead of those who rarely or never attended such programs.³⁰

In a separate study Barna researchers found that nearly half of all Americans who accept Christ as their Saviour do so before reaching the age of thirteen with only one out of every four born again Christians doing so after their twenty-first birthday. These figures have been shown to be consistent with similar studies conducted during the past twenty years.³¹ While these are US based figures I know of no evidence to suggest that they would be markedly different here in the South Pacific and my anecdotal evidence from experience as well as conversations with other children's ministry leaders suggests a strong similarity.

What then can we learn from how Wesley implemented his belief that children are a priority in the mission of God? How can we answer such questions as - What does it mean for the church if we place children in the midst as Jesus did? What would it mean if children were to be placed at the heart of the church rather than being segregated into their own spaces away from the rest of the church as so often happens in Christian churches? How can the church support families in fulfilling God's mission as regards children?³²

If we are to learn from Wesley we first need to decide whether we accept that he was right to believe children are a priority in the mission of God. Do we accept that children are important to God? Do we believe, as Wesley did, that in order to have strong churches we need to teach the children? Do we believe as he did that God begins his work in children and that the work spreads from there to those who are older? After all, what Wesley was saying was no different to what Jesus said:

³⁰'New Research Explores the Long-Term Effect of Spiritual Activity among Children and Teens', *The Barna Group*, 2009, <http://www.barna.org/family-kids-articles/321-new-research-explores-the-long-term-effect-of-spiritual-activity-among-children-and-teens>, accessed 16 July 2012.

³¹'Evangelism is Most Effective among Kids,' *The Barna Group*, 2004, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/196-evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids>.

³²Keith J. White, 'Insights into Child Theology through the Life and Work of Pandita Ramabai,' (October 31, 2006): 97, <http://www.childtheology.org/new/docuploads/OCMS%2031.10.06.pdf>.

One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could touch and bless them. But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering him. When Jesus saw what was happening, he was angry with his disciples. He said to them, 'Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like these children. I tell you the truth, anyone who doesn't receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.' Then he took the children in his arms and placed his hands on their heads and blessed them (Mark 10:13-16, NLT).³³

Like so many adults throughout history, Jesus' disciples considered children to be unimportant. Children were to be seen and not heard at best and they certainly should not take up Jesus' time. They believed that his time was precious and therefore felt that he should spend it on the 'important' people, that is, adults. But Jesus put the disciples in their place and made it clear that children are important for they show us how we are to accept God's offer of justifying grace and so be able to receive the kingdom of God – by receiving it with simple faith. And because children believe with simple faith they are more open to the good news of the Gospel and more readily accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour than those who are older. God can work with, and through, children in a way that is far more difficult to do with adults.

Eighteen centuries later, Wesley came to believe that children were important to God because God's plan of salvation depended on them.³⁴ Unfortunately this is a truth that the body of Christ seems to have forgotten again. My experience in the latter part of the twentieth century in New Zealand, and my discussions with Children's Ministry workers in recent years have convinced me that we have made it harder for the truth of the Gospel to be received because we allowed Children's Ministry to become a 'babysitting' service. Consider, for instance, the children who were part of our churches in the 1980s and 1990s. Sadly far too few of them are in our churches today. By merely 'babysitting' those children we have done exactly what John Wesley said would happen if teachers did not employ the correct pedagogical techniques. His concern was that the child would equate bad teaching practices with Christianity causing it to 'stink in the[ir] nostrils.' This was a concern for him

³³ Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

³⁴Wesley, Journal Entry for 8 June, 1784, 279.

because under such circumstances any move to accept God's offer of salvation would be at least delayed, if not frustrated altogether.³⁵

By not actively equipping and empowering children to live in this world and the next the church of the late twentieth century has caused Christianity to 'stink in the nostrils' of so many. The proof of that is in our churches as those who were children in the latter part of the twentieth century are now parents who stay away from the church in droves. Many are missing from our churches because they were not introduced to Christ at a young age. They did not learn what it meant to be a follower of Christ because they were just tolerated in church at best or consigned to being babysat in a back room of the church so that they would not distract the 'important' people (adults) from worshipping God. We did not educate them in the knowledge and love of God in a way that enabled them to accept Christ as their Lord and Saviour. We did not equip and empower them to live holy lives. They are not in our churches today because we did not give them priority in the mission of God.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to advance discussion on the shape and nature of ministry to and with children in the twenty-first century. I have shown how recent research and Wesley's beliefs and actions accord with the importance Jesus placed on children in matters of faith (Mark 10:13-16). In contrast, the enumeration of some of the negative consequences of children's ministry practices in the late twentieth century has shown that the low view of children in matters of faith development that underlies such practices is not an appropriate view for those to hold who seek to work in concert with God's mission. Taken together the consideration of Scripture, theology, practice and research in this article shows that if the twenty-first century church wants to work in concert with the mission of God it must place the same priority on the evangelism and discipleship of children as Wesley did - and which God does. The question of 'how' is part of the discussion which this article seeks to advance.

³⁵Wesley, 'A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children,' para. 6, 476.