

JOHN WESLEY AND THE RISING GENERATION

Chris Ritter



PASTOR AND AUTHOR CHRIS RITTER CONSIDERS WESLEY'S COMMITMENT TO MINISTRY WITH CHILDREN

'Gift or no gift, you are to do this, or else you are not called to be a Methodist Preacher.'

John Wesley

In June 1784, John Wesley found himself surrounded by a group of over sixty children, aged six to fourteen. He had just preached a sermon at Stockton-on-Tees in County Durham when the children approached him and, one by one, began to kneel. The aged Wesley knelt among them. Soon the adults were drawn back into the building for prayer. Wesley wrote in his journal, 'The fire kindled from heart to heart till few, if any, were unaffected. Is this not a new thing on earth? God begins his work with children! Thus it has also been in Cornwall, Manchester, and Epworth.'

Not only did the Methodist Revival include children, but Wesley ensured that ministry with children would remain a priority. Unless Methodists continually invest in the rising generation, he asserted, 'the present Revival will be a *res unius aetatis*,' a thing of only one age.

No one ever accused Wesley of Peter Pan Syndrome. Like others of his age, he seemed to view childhood as a sort of illness that one might hope to overcome as quickly as possible. Ever committed to diligence, Wesley even wrote a tract opposing holidays from recess in school. But it is also clear that Wesley cherished children and their souls.

The records of early Methodist conferences include explicit expectations that Wesley placed upon his preachers. While these requirements were not limited to leaders, they demonstrate a top-down commitment that shaped the DNA of the early Methodist movement.

TEACH CHILDREN INTENTIONALLY

Long before Crosby, Stills and Nash were singing about it, Methodists understood the value of teaching children well. Although Wesley is best known as an evangelist and organizer, he spent more time on education than any other single concern. It is sometimes said that Methodism built a school before it ever built a chapel. Wesley's Lessons for Children were a series of two hundred Bible stories for use with younger children. Every Methodist home was encouraged to obtain Wesley's best-selling Instructions for Children, a 39-page catechism he adapted from a French source. He worked tirelessly to build schools, edit curricula, and equip parents.

For Wesley, true education was aimed at formation, not just information. In his sermon 'On the Education of Children' he named the sins that Christian training would help children overcome. Among these were self-worship, pride, deviation from truth, and living contrary to justice. The end of Christian education was to help children think, judge, and act like Christ. Proper education is an extension of God's sanctifying grace.

Methodist preachers were to spend at least an hour each week teaching children. This was a non-delegable task: 'Gift or no gift, you are to do this, or else you are not called to be a Methodist Preacher.' As to the spirit of the task, Wesley

would recall the long-suffering instructions of his own mother. He noted how his father, frustrated by overhearing his wife's repetitive lessons, asked, 'How could you have the patience to tell that blockhead the same thing twenty times over?' Her reply: 'If I had told him only nineteen times, I would have wasted all my labour.' We can only assume the blockhead in question was young John. We can be grateful for her persistence.

KNOW CHILDREN PERSONALLY

Home visits were a mandated practice of every Methodist preacher. In America, we often excuse ourselves from our ordination vow to 'visit from house to house,' saying that people don't really want or expect that in today's world. But I am not sure they wanted it in Wesley's day, either. A visit from a Methodist preacher was something of a spiritual audit of the home. The format for home visits was taken from Puritan Richard Baxter and included direct questioning about sin, spiritual disciplines, and spiritual progress. Wesley added to Baxter's programme an expectation of personal conversation with the children in each home.

After speaking a few loving words to everyone in the house, Wesley encouraged private dialogues with each person about their spiritual progress. The goal was to get to the topic of the heart. Asking good questions would help a visiting preacher know their level of each child's understanding: 'With these you are to be exceedingly tender, lest they be discouraged. If you perceive they are troubled that they cannot answer, step in and take the burden off them, answering the question yourself. And do it thoroughly and plainly.'

Preachers were also to lead group instructions for children in each society. While adults needed a quarterly ticket to participate, children were under no such restriction. Ministry with children was an extension of God's prevenient grace and seeking love.

PRAY FOR CHILDREN INTENSELY

Perhaps the best-known story of Wesley's own childhood was the terrible rectory fire from which five-year-old 'Jackie' barely escaped. Susanna, visibly pregnant with her youngest child, knelt to embrace her rescued son, calling him a 'brand plucked from the burning,' an allusion to Zechariah 3:2. She later wrote, 'I determined to pray all the more diligently for him.' Wesley owned his mother's prayers as a great force in his life. Despite the large household she managed, Susanna dedicated one night a week to each child for personal prayer, instruction, and spiritual guidance. She also gathered her whole household together on Sunday nights for a service of evening prayer. These prayer meetings famously spread to the entire community.

Wesley considered his mother exemplary and asked her to record the pattern of spiritual formation she undertook with her children. He published this under the title, 'The Way of Education.' It is a testament to both organization and prayer. Amid high demands and incredible hardships, Susanna was in the habit of bringing her Bible to a favourite chair and placing her long apron over her head. It was her own miniature 'tent



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of meeting.' Everyone in the household knew to respect this signal to leave her undisturbed as she prayed for her family and others.

It was said of Wesley that 'he always had a smile and a kind word for the children, and his manner was to place his hands on their heads and give them his heavenly benediction.' Just as Charles Wesley edited a collection of hymns for children, John Wesley edited for them a collection of prayers with the preface: 'A lover of your soul has here drawn up a few prayers in order to assist you in that great duty. Be sure that you do not omit, at least morning and evening, to present yourself upon your knees before God.'

MENTOR FAMILIES MEANINGFULLY

Wesley understood a concept later made explicit by Frederick Douglas: 'It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men.' Preachers were admonished to train parents in 'Mr Henry's method of family prayer.' The Henry in question was Puritan preacher Phillip Henry, the father of Bible commentator Matthew Henry. His twice-daily regime of family prayer included thanksgiving, psalms, confession, and intercession. Children were taught from the catechism and each Sunday the family would reaffirm their baptismal vows. If all this sounds a bit monastic, it was unapologetically so: 'He who would make his house a little church shall find that God will make it a little sanctuary.'

I don't know about you, but I feel a bit rotten about my own parenting when I read about families like the Henrys. But Wesley's admonition was persistence and resolve. His focus was on God's empowering grace and not our personal failings. In his sermon, 'On Obedience to Parents,' he reminded parents that they can do all things through Christ. God intervenes through grace to fill in the cracks left by our own omissions. Methodists were to train and encourage families to be small churches producing great Christians.

CHALLENGE OURSELVES CONTINUALLY

Ministry with children is often messy, thankless work. Yet this fits well within our covenant prayer to serve Christ even when we find the work unsuitable to both our natural inclinations and material interests. It was on ministry with children that Wesley said, 'Do it as you can until you can do it as you would.' As an older man, Wesley had a gift of encouraging younger leaders. William Wilberforce is a famous example. But we should also know the name Sophia Cooke Bradburn. As a young woman, Sophia lived in the same house as the elderly John Wesley. He would greet her cheerfully each morning with the words, 'Sophia, live today!' She took his advice.

When the Revd Robert Raikes asked Sophia what they should do for the poor children in the streets of London, her response was, 'Let's teach them to read and take them to church.' Sophia became perhaps the world's first Sunday School teacher. As she and the Revd Raikes marched the kids to church, people laughed at what seemed to be miserable parade of urchins. The first 'Sunday Charity Schools' were derided as 'Raikes' Ragged Schools.' Why bother to teach these children who

were only destined for manual labour? Some even accused them of political indoctrination. But Sophia and the Revd Raikes ignored these heckles from the cheap seats and persevered. Wesley highlighted their work in the Arminian Magazine. Forty years later, an estimated 1.25 million British children were enrolled in a Sunday School.

CARE FOR CHILDREN PRACTICALLY

The first generation of Methodists built schools, started orphanages, and fed hungry children. Meeting practical needs was viewed as a natural and necessary accompaniment to the work of evangelism. Thomas Rutherford, an early Methodist preacher, travelled with Wesley and later shared stories from his life. Near Glasgow, Wesley noticed a girl without shoes or socks. He dismounted, called the child over, spoke some encouraging words, and gave her some money (Wesley often saved his shiniest coins to give to children). As the preachers continued their journey, the girl's bare feet sparked an old memory for Wesley that he relayed to his companion.

Wesley had been teaching at a school in Savannah, Georgia and his friend, Charles Delamotte, taught at another. One day Delamotte complained that boys in his school mercilessly teased their poorer classmates who had no shoes. No matter how he scolded them, the ridicule continued. Wesley thought for a moment and offered to step in and help. On an appointed week, Wesley showed up at Delamotte's school to teach... barefooted. By the end of the week, all the boys were coming to school without shoes to be more like their instructor.

Near the end of his life, John Wesley was asked by a young preacher: 'What advice can you give in order to continue the great revival of which you have been a principle instrument?'

Wesley's reply was short and simple: 'Take care of the rising generation.'

The Revd Dr Chris Ritter is the author of Seven Things John Wesley Expected Us to Do for Kids (Abingdon Press, 2016) and blogs at peopleneedjesus.net. He and the congregation he serves, Geneseo First Methodist Church in Illinois, USA, are reaffiliating in 2023 with the Global Methodist Church.

