as a Little Child: Children in the Theology of John Wesley

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Dedication

To my fellow ordained Ministers, Pastors (including Children’s and Children & Families Pastors), Children’s Ministry Leaders and Children’s Ministry Workers who as help the Holy Spirit to bring the light and hope of the Gospel to the lives of children in the prayerful expectation that they will accept God’s Justifying Grace and will in time be glorified and spend eternity with the one and only true God.

May God bless you abundantly for the work you do in developing and nurturing the faith of each and every child.

*I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith in him is being talked about all over the world."

(Romans 1:8, NLT)
A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

I would not have been able to complete this work without the help and support of many people. So many people have helped me get to this point and to each of you my heartfelt thanks and appreciation. There are some who deserve special mention however and to each of these I give my special thanks.

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To the staff and faculty of Carey Baptist College for your support, encouragement and nurture through five wonderful years of study and fellowship. You helped awaken in me a passion for theological study which will be a life-long pursuit.

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To the officers and members of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of New Zealand as well as to those members of the wider Wesleyan Church family thank you for your encouragement and support also.

And to my friends in the Carey “post grad lounge” thank you for your friendship and the lively discussions we had. Those days “working” away together were a highlight of my time at Carey and being together made life just that little bit easier – well most of the time.

Finally but by no means least to my children – Carole, Lynda, Angela and Douglas - who put up with so much as I studied for five years to get to this point (not to mention the days that have gone into the final “corrections” over the last few months) my very special and heartfelt thanks.

May God who knows what you do bless you all abundantly beyond all you could ever imagine.

Rev Peter Benzie
December 2010
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In one of my lectures we were told “Don’t expect your thesis to change the world.” Well I do! After all what is the use of spending so much time researching and writing if the final work is just going to gather dust on the shelves (or in this day and age be consigned to the ether that is electronic communication) never to see the light of day again.

And so whilst written in the style required of an academic scholarly work it is my hope that it is also written in such a way as to be readable by anyone who has an interest in Children's Ministry and who wants to get at least a small idea of what John Wesley, practical theologian and founder of Methodism, believed and practiced in relation to ministering to children.

It is my intention to publish a book from this work in the near future but in the meantime I offer this suggestion as to how to get the best of this thesis – read it and do it! In reading it -

the academic / scholar will find the whole work of interest

those who have little or no understanding of who John Wesley was or of his theology will find it helpful to also read the whole work in order to place the lessons I believe we can learn from him in context

those who know who he was but know little of his theology will find they can read from Chapter Two and still be able to place the lessons I believe we can learn from him in context

those who know who he was and feel they have a sufficient grasp of his theology will find that starting from Chapter Three will enable them to place the lessons in the context of John Wesley, the man and the theologian

and finally those who just want to find out the lessons for today can read the final chapter – Chapter 5 “Concluding Reflections and Potential Applications” and will find they have sufficient information to be able to implement those lessons in their ministry today.

My prayer is that everyone who reads this, but especially those who minister to children, will learn something that they can apply in their ministry that will help them lead others into right relationship with God.

*May God who knows what you do bless you abundantly beyond all you could ever imagine.*

*Rev Peter Benzie*

*December 2010*
What does it mean to teach, feed, and provide for children in a Wesleyan sense? How can this be done in a way which is faithful to Wesleyan doctrine and theology? Indeed is it even possible? Is teaching, feeding, and providing for children a Wesleyan thing to do? Would John Wesley, the founder of the revival movement we now know as Methodism, be supportive of bringing lost children into the fold and into the fullness of the stature of Christ? In other words, what should the theological foundation be for the ministry of those, especially those in the Wesleyan tradition, called to minister to children in the twenty-first century?

These are some of the questions which this thesis provides answers to as it considers two fundamental questions. The first – whether, and if so how were, children to be found in the theology of John Wesley? The second – what lessons can Wesley teach those called to children’s ministry in the twenty-first century?

Through considering the writings of John Wesley, as well as the work of other scholars, this thesis finds that children were evident in his theology. Wesley is shown to have undertaken something akin to child theology when he, for instance, allowed his theology to be informed and changed by the many instances of childhood faith he witnessed. He is shown to be a man who treasured children as a gift from God, who, he believed entrusts parents and teachers with the responsibility of educating them so that they can live lives of true holiness, that is, loving God and their neighbour.

As an example of child theology it considers Wesley’s theological views regarding children and how they informed his educational endeavours in order to identify six significant lessons for those called by God to minister to children through the twenty-first century Christian church. The first five of those lessons are 1) seek help, and learn, from others; 2) ensure that the theological viewpoint of the parent body (usually the local church) informs the theological views regarding children which are to be played out in the practical ministry to children; 3) know the goal which is to be achieved and allow that to inform ministry praxis including programming, personnel selection and methodology; 4) actively support the work of others; and 5) be prepared for criticism and opposition.
The sixth lesson that Wesley brings is the key one – do not place any limits on God. Rather those called to children’s ministry in the twenty-first century should be ready to work with God as an agent of God’s prevenient grace as God draws children into right relationship with himself. In the process they are to disciple those children in a life of holiness.

Along the way this thesis shows that not only would John Wesley be supportive of bringing lost children into the fold and into the fullness of the stature of Christ in the twenty-first century, he would require it to be done as a matter of priority and urgency.
INTRODUCTION

You are under-shepherds of the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, called to teach and admonish to feed and provide for the Lord’s family, to bring the lost into the fold, to bring each person to the fullness of the stature of Christ. Remember always the greatness of this responsibility and give yourselves without reservation to the ministry to which God has called you.¹

So reads part of the charge to those who are ordained, as I was in November 2009, as Ministers within the Wesleyan Methodist Church of New Zealand. As I responded positively to this charge I did so recognising that I was accepting that whilst called to minister to the whole of the Lord’s family I am called to focus on, and minister particularly to, the chronologically youngest members of that family – the children. That is to say, my specific call as an under-shepherd of the Lord Jesus is to bring lost children into the fold and to the fullness of the stature of Christ. Which begs questions such as – what does this mean in a Wesleyan sense? How do I do that in a way which is faithful to Wesleyan doctrine and theology? Indeed is it even possible? Is teaching, feeding, and providing for children a Wesleyan thing to do? Would John Wesley the founder of the revival movement we now know as Methodism, and from which the Wesleyan Methodist Church of New Zealand proudly claims its theological heritage, be supportive of bringing lost children into the fold and to the fullness of the stature of Christ? In other words, what should the theological foundation be for those called to minister to children, within the Wesleyan tradition, in the twenty-first century?

These are some of the questions which provide the motivation for this thesis which will provide answers to two fundamental questions. The first – whether, and if so how, were children to be found in the theology of John Wesley?² The second – what lessons can Wesley teach those of us called to children’s ministry in the twenty-first century? In answering these key questions this thesis will also answer the secondary questions asked above, or at least will provide a base from which further thought and work can be undertaken.

² Subsequently in this work I will refer to John Wesley as “Wesley” unless the context requires otherwise. For the sake of clarity, when referring to other members of his family, I will use their full name (e.g. Susanna Wesley) again unless the context requires otherwise.
As an exercise aimed at providing insights into the place of children in the practical theology of John Wesley, and the potential applicability of his theological views today, this thesis is informed by child theology. A brief explanation of this emerging discipline, sufficient to provide a framework within which this thesis can be located, is therefore appropriate.  

**Child Theology**

Three of the foremost theologians working in the field, Keith J. White, Haddon Willmer, and Marcia J. Bunge provide this working definition of child theology:

*Child Theology is an investigation that considers and evaluates central themes of theology, - historical, biblical and systematic - in the light of the child standing beside Jesus in the midst of the disciples. This child is like a lens through which some aspects of God and his revelation can...*

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4 Keith J White is a Director of the Child Theology Movement and is credited with creating the phrase “child theology.” He “preaches and teaches on theology. He is trained and experienced in Literature, Theology, Sociology, Child Development, ... social work and Community Development.” *Child Theology Movement - Directors and Staff,* n.d., http://www.childtheology.org/new/staff.php?piID=3#keith (accessed 1 April 2009); “Theology of the Child and Child Theology” (accessed 10 December 2009); White and Willmer, *An Introduction to Child Theology*, Back Cover (accessed 1 April 2009).

5 “Haddon Willmer is emeritus Professor of Theology at the University of Leeds, England, where he taught for 32 years. He is a trustee of the Child Theology Movement. ... Besides writing with Keith White on Child Theology, he works on forgiveness and politics, Bonhoeffer and Barth and English Evangelicalism in the age of Wilberforce and the present.” Haddon Willmer, *Experimenting Together: One Way of Doing Child Theology* (London: Child Theology Movement, 2007), Back Cover.

6 Marcia J. Bunge is a Director of the Child Theology Movement and “Professor of Theology and Humanities at Christ College, Valparaiso University and Director of the Child in Religion and Ethics Project, which aims to strengthen theological and ethical understandings of children and childhood. She edited “The Child in Christian Thought” (Eerdmans, 2001) and has written several articles on children and childhood. She is also a consultant for the “Centre for the Theology of Childhood” and the co-chair of the “Childhood Studies and Religious Consultation” of the American Academy of Religion.” *Child Theology Movement - Directors and Staff* (accessed 1 April 2009); Willmer, *Experimenting Together*, Back Cover.
be seen more clearly. Or, if you like, the child is like a light that throws existing theology into new relief.\textsuperscript{7}

Here then, we see the stimulus for child theology. In order to answer the disciples’ question as to who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus places a child in their midst, saying

\begin{quote}
I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven.\textsuperscript{8}
\end{quote}

Taking its cue from Jesus then, child theology is a way of undertaking theological and biblical studies using the child and children as a lens for it is they that are its central concerns. In doing so child theology sheds new light on existing theology, theological doctrines and ecclesial practices. Child theology then, in a very general sense, is any theology which is undertaken where the child is the key area of concern.\textsuperscript{9}

Whilst the child and children are the key areas of concern, it is important to appreciate that they are not the focus of child theology. Rather the focus of the theological activity is Jesus Christ. To put it another way, child theology uses the lens of the child and children to start with, and focus on, Jesus Christ in order to ask

\begin{quote}
what light children throw on God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and His way of doing things in His world (that is, The Kingdom of Heaven).\textsuperscript{10}
\end{quote}

The approach taken is inclusive so that child theology works in conversation with other related fields. Significant child theologians\textsuperscript{11} are keen to ensure that it is not a stand-alone discipline and that child theology is undertaken in a way which respects the history and processes of other theological fields. At the same time it invites other branches of learning to challenge and critique it so that the result of the conversation is a place where all fields of study have been developed and enriched by each other.\textsuperscript{12}

Child theology is best performed as an inclusive and open-ended conversation involving people from all parts of the body of Christ including academics, practitioners,

\textsuperscript{7} White and Willmer, \textit{An Introduction to Child Theology}, 6.
\textsuperscript{8} Matt 18:3 (NLT). N.B. Biblical references will be taken from the TNIV unless noted. In this instance I have chosen to use the NLT as it better emphasises Jesus’ point regarding conversion.
\textsuperscript{10} White, “Child Theology and HCD,” 2 (accessed 5 December 2009).
\textsuperscript{11} In particular Keith J. White, Haddon Willmer and Marcia J. Bunge.
\textsuperscript{12} White, “Child Theology and HCD,” 3.
women, men, clergy and lay people as well as those of all denominations, ethnicities and geographical locations. As a discipline it is uniquely placed to be able to do so for by its nature it does not exclude anyone. It comes from no one denominational perspective and has no inherent set of beliefs, other than in the importance and place of children in informing our theology and hence our Christian practice. As importantly, by its nature, it includes every person in the world because every person is, or has been, a child. In addition every human being is a child of God.\textsuperscript{13}

In all this it must be acknowledged that child theology is undertaken by adults not by children. It was the adult Jesus who put the child in the midst of the disciples. It was not the child who said “Here I am, I will show you.” However, whilst it is adults who undertake child theology that is not to say that it is from an adult perspective entirely. Rather than imposing adult concepts and meanings on the child, child theology requires that the theologian allows the child to speak and show the way.\textsuperscript{14} This is especially the case in that branch of child theology which takes as its source “the theology created by the child.” Here we listen to what the child is saying about God and the relationship it has with him. By doing so we learn how the child sees that relationship and we begin to understand, from the child’s perspective, how it affects them.\textsuperscript{15} We also gain an insight into God’s relationship with children and where they fit within the \textit{missio Dei}. As we will see Wesley took seriously the theology practised by the children with whom he interacted.

Child theology is important because it has the potential to address what Bunge suggests is one of the reasons that many churches struggle to create and sustain strong, vibrant children’s ministries. In her view this is due partly to a lack of biblically, and historically, informed teaching about children in contemporary theology.\textsuperscript{16} Child theology helps to address this by finding answers to questions such as – How does God see children. Are they part of the mission of God in the world and if so how? Does God want the child outside the community of believers as part of the church? What of the Bible – how should the grand narrative that is the Bible be interpreted with children in mind? 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

\textsuperscript{13} White, “Insights into Child Theology,” 97; White and Willmer, \textit{An Introduction to Child Theology}, 7.

\textsuperscript{14} Willmer, “Child Theology” (accessed 27 March 2009).


often happens in Christian churches? How can the church support families in fulfilling God’s mission as regards children? These are just a few of the questions which child theology helps the church to answer in order to help to determine the shape its ministry to children should take.\textsuperscript{17}

It is also an important discipline of study because of the potential it has to enable the Bible to be read more accurately and new lessons to be learnt from church history. Also, in addition to facilitating the identification of new lessons from theology it provides the opportunity to reform and renew theology, specifically as in how it informs the daily lives of individuals, the corporate community of the people of God and the wider community.\textsuperscript{18} For instance, child theology can play a vital role in the wider community by adding its voice to the wider academic and public discussion on, and around, children.\textsuperscript{19} In fact it is vital that it does for, as David Hadley Jensen comments, the way that children are either nurtured or neglected by the church and society in general, is determined in part by our theological understandings of children.\textsuperscript{20}

A contemporary example may be useful here. The question of how to teach children what is and is not appropriate behaviour, as well as how to discipline them and correct their bad behaviour, has been the subject of much discussion and debate in my country - New Zealand. This is no more evident than in the legislation passed in 2007 which has as its purpose

\...

to amend the principal [Crimes] Act to make better provision for children to live in a safe and secure environment free from violence by abolishing the use of parental force for the purpose of correction.\textsuperscript{21}

The debate which both preceded and continues after the passing of the legislation has primarily, in my view, been focussed on “rights.” As can be seen from the purpose statement of the enacted legislation the motivation of the proponents of the legislation was the right of children to grow up in a safe environment free from abuse. Whilst

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{17} White, “Insights into Child Theology,” 97.
\bibitem{19} Bunge, \textit{The Child in Christian Thought}, 7.
\bibitem{20} David Hadley Jensen, \textit{Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood} (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005), 2.
\end{thebibliography}
agreeing that children have this right, key opponents also advocate that it is the right of parents to decide how to teach, discipline and correct their children.

However the debate appears not to have been informed by a comprehensive theological understanding of children, at least not during the passage of the legislation through the parliamentary system. Such theological input would, for instance, have provided a sound basis for understanding the “rights” of children as given to them by God as creatures made in the *imago Dei*. It would have provided answers to questions such as how does God see children? How would God have children treated in order that they can become all that he wants them to be? How are children seen in the Bible? What can theologians, such as Wesley, tell us that might inform our thinking? How can theology be used to inform how we understand children and therefore how best to raise them? Having identified the answers to these, and similar questions, all concerned would be in a better position to develop appropriate solutions to the issue which underlies the legislation, being the welfare of children.

This is more than using Proverbs 13:24 as a proof text. It is taking a holistic view of scripture and theological thinking to develop an understanding of what is God’s best for children. It is allowing the issue to be informed by theology which places the child in the midst.

22 Recently (approximately two years after the passing of the legislation) Nove Vailaau has published a small booklet in which he suggests that a robust, biblically based child theology advocates against smacking and hence supports the legislation. This provides some input to the process of allowing theology to inform the discussion, however, in my opinion, further work is necessary to develop a comprehensive theological understanding of children. *A Theology of Children* (n.p.: Barnardos New Zealand and the Royal New Zealand Plunket Society, 2009). A key opponent of the legislation Bob McCoskrie (National Director - Family First New Zealand) when asked by the author what the theological and / or scriptural basis of his, and others, opposition was, replied (in an email to the author dated 12 August 2009) “Nope – no biblical basis from our end. In fact I cringed every time someone used that passage [Proverbs 13:24] as a justification. I don’t think Scripture talks about time out, smacking, withdrawal of privileges etc[.] It simply talks about raising good kids in “the way they should go” with loving discipline and direction[.] Discipline is to disciple[.] As long as it’s not harmful and abusive, I think God has given generations of parents a natural instinct of what works and what doesn’t – but of course there are always exceptions[.]”

23 Wesley, for instance, advocated that all other means of correcting the child’s behaviour should be tried first. Physical correction (e.g. smacking) should be the absolute last resort and should only be used when all other means have been tried and failed. Quoting Proverbs 13:24 and Proverbs 19:18 he cautions against assuming that smacking is never appropriate saying that when we assume that we are saying we are wiser than God. John Wesley, “Sermon 94, “On Family Religion”,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol 7: Second Series (87-108) Third Series of Sermons (109-126) Fourth Series of Sermons (127-133) Fifth Series of Sermons (134-141), ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), sec. III.4, 80-81.

24 Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are careful to discipline them. Prov 13:24.
Rationale for this Thesis

John Wesley is probably one of the most written about figures in history. Kenneth Collins’ bibliography of material by or about Wesley for instance, lists nearly 2,000 separate works, both published and unpublished. With that in mind the question may well be asked as to what else there is to write about. As difficult as it may be to comprehend there is one area which is noticeable by its relative absence from this wealth of material. That area is his theological views regarding children.

The most comprehensive and detailed examination of Wesley and children undertaken in the last twenty years is Susan Willhauck’s 1992 PhD Dissertation John Wesley’s View of Children: Foundations for Contemporary Christian Education. Willhauck uses an examination of Wesley’s own writings to show that children were important to Wesley and that he believed they were capable of a deeply religious life and faith. She uses her findings concerning Wesley’s theological views regarding children to suggest ways in which they can inform the reassessment of the effectiveness of Christian education in her denomination.

In the course of her work, Willhauck interacts with a number of scholars who have also written on aspects of Wesley’s theological views regarding children. These include Frederick Murrell, writing in 1891, Charles Rishell (1902) and David Ingersoll Naglee, whose 1987 work on infant baptism is the most recent scholarly work she uses to inform her research. In discussing the work of such scholars, Willhauck provides, in most cases, sufficient detail of their views for us to understand their positions. Willhauck’s dissertation, both in terms of her own investigation and her interaction with other scholars, has been a major source of secondary information for this thesis.

The most recent work, and the only published work this century, that provides some insight into Wesley’s theological views regarding children is Richard P. Heitzenrater’s

27 Ibid., v.
chapter “John Wesley and Children” in Bunge’s book *The Child in Christian Thought*.\(^{31}\) The majority of his chapter contextualises the small amount of his material that deals directly with Wesley’s views on children and faith. It has been a valuable resource not only for this contextual material but also as regards Wesley’s educational views and his programme of education, which I consider in chapter four.

Wesley’s theological views regarding children have also been discussed in the slightly larger body of work that considers Wesley’s educational ideas and programs. Again very few works deal specifically with his educational interests and even fewer of these discuss Wesley’s theological views regarding children. Within this body of work James Riley Estep Jr,\(^{32}\) Elmer L. Towns,\(^{33}\) and Donald Tranter\(^ {34}\) are key scholars who discuss Wesley’s views on the possibility of children having a saving faith at a young age. Estep and Towns also cite John W. Prince’s\(^ {35}\) views on this.

It is therefore fair to say that amongst Wesleyan scholarship Wesley’s theological understanding of children has not been the focus of a great deal of study. Also apparent is the fact that there has been even less scholarship which seeks to do as he did. That is with the exception of Willhauck and Naglee none have attempted to identify how his theological views regarding children might be adapted for the everyday life of Christians; and the Christian church, today.

With its twin aims of firstly, identifying whether, and if so how, children can be found in Wesley’s theology and secondly, determining what he can teach us that may help us in ministering to children in the twenty-first century, this thesis follows in the footsteps of Willhauck and Naglee. The result will not only be an increased understanding of Wesley’s theological views regarding children, but also further options for adapting those views for use in practical ministry to children in the twenty-first century. That said one question I will attempt to answer, for which it appears no-one has so far attempted to provide an answer, is the question of at what age did Wesley believe a child could


be regenerated, which is to say converted or born again. A contribution is thus sought to be made to the three fields of Wesleyan studies, child theology and practical theology.

Whilst the results of my work here may be applicable to children’s ministries undertaken across the Christian church, my hope is that it will be of particular use within those churches and movements that consider themselves part of the wider John Wesley family of churches. Even more so however, my earnest desire is that it can assist in the work of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of New Zealand as together we identify what it means to be Wesleyan in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand and

Exalt Jesus Christ by: Evangelising the lost, Discipling the believers, Equipping the Church and ministering to society.

Scope and Outline

The parameters of this thesis have had to be tightly defined in order to ensure that the focus remains on the twin aims outlined earlier. Only that material which is directly relevant to Wesley’s theological views regarding children or which helps us to identify the lessons from him that are applicable to children’s ministry in the twenty-first century has therefore been included.

In the first chapter a brief biographical and historical review of Wesley and his times is provided. We begin that review with a tightly focused consideration of the society into which Wesley was born and in which he ministered almost his entire adult life. It is also in this chapter that we are introduced to Wesley as he was reared and educated in the Epworth rectory before leaving for higher education at Charterhouse School and Oxford University. As we consider his upbringing we briefly encounter his mother and in so doing obtain an insight into her influence on his views regarding children and their education. In this chapter we also consider a few of the events in his life which are significant in the development and implementation of his theology.

That theology is considered by way of an overview in chapter two. This review of his theology looks at each of the eight areas of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions. My aim

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36 Throughout this thesis where I use the phrase “John Wesley family of churches” I am referring to those denominations (for example, but not limited to, Methodist, Wesleyan, Church of the Nazarene) and movements who trace their theological roots to the theology and teachings of John and Charles Wesley.

in this chapter is not to comment on his theology but to provide a foundation of knowledge such that we can later identify whether children are within its purview. No attempt is therefore made to interact with any scholarship that questions, or for that matter affirms, the correctness or integrity of Wesley’s theology.

With that overview in mind the question of whether, and if so how, children are to be found in Wesley’s theology is addressed in chapter three. Once again, we will look at the eight areas of his doctrinal convictions. As we identify the evidence that proves children are evident in Wesley’s theology we will look for answers to questions such as - at what age did he believe children need to be justified, regenerated and sanctified? At what age did he believe children could be justified, regenerated and sanctified? Did he believe children could practise the means of grace? In answering these questions we will consider what he said in his own writings as well as interacting with scholars who have expressed their views on Wesley’s theological views regarding children.

Having identified that children were evident in Wesley’s theology we use his educational endeavours as a test case in chapter four. In doing so, we take a similar approach to our review of Wesley’s theology. That is, the aim of discussing his educational undertakings is to see whether, and if so how, they were informed by how he saw children in his theology. For this reason the contemporary validity or otherwise of his efforts is not addressed in depth.

Wesley’s educational efforts are also examined in order to realise the second major aim of this thesis which is to identify lessons from him which may be useful for those called to children’s ministry in the twenty-first century. Six of the most significant lessons form the conclusion to this thesis.

**Some Final Thoughts on Methodology**

**Sources**

As noted earlier, there is very little in the way of published material which provides insight into either Wesley’s theological views regarding children or his educational endeavours. At the same time one advantage which those of us working in the field of Wesleyan studies have is the availability of Wesley’s own writings. I have chosen therefore to use as my major source of information the primary material of his sermons,
journals, letters, treatises etc as contained in *The Works of John Wesley*\(^{38}\) and have supplemented this with as much of the secondary material as I could reasonably access.

Of the numerous editions of Wesley’s *Works* that are available I have used the 2007 reprint of the 1872 (Jackson) edition\(^{39}\) published by Baker Books as my primary source. Whilst a copy of the 1829 edition was accessible its rare condition made constant reference to it unrealistic. That said, on every occasion where I checked the two editions against each other, the wording was identical. I am confident therefore that the material I have used is as accurate a copy of Wesley’s own words as is available to me.

This reliance primarily on the earliest possible editions is the correct approach in this thesis given my desire to get as close to John Wesley’s own words as was practicable in order to get as pure a view of his thinking as possible. That is not to say that subsequent editors have misrepresented Wesley’s thoughts but the passage of time must of necessity bring some differences in interpretation.\(^{40}\)

Recognising the many editions of Wesley’s works which are available I have used the style sheet published by Heitzenrater\(^{41}\) as the basis for citing material based on, or quoted from, Wesley’s *Works*. I hope this assists all readers to identify the words of Wesley which I am referring to no matter which edition of his *Works* they choose to access.

**A Grammatical Note**

The reader will notice that both the past and present tense are often used in the same paragraph and sometimes in the same sentence, throughout this thesis. Whilst this

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\(^{39}\) The Bicentennial edition has been used to provide background information regarding times, places etc relating to Wesley’s sermons. In all other instances it is the Jackson edition which has been used.

\(^{40}\) One of the markers (policy means that at the time of publication I do not know the name of this person) and a subsequent reviewer in an email to the author dated 28 September 2020 (Glen O’Brien, “your Thesis,” September 21, 2010) suggested that rather than use the 1872 Jackson edition I should have used the *Bicentennial Edition of The Works of John Wesley*. Whilst I acknowledge that this is a valid approach I stand by the use of the Jackson edition as being the most valid for the purposes and aims of this thesis.

\(^{41}\) The actual style used is my own modification of Heitzenrater’s “Citing Wesley Style Sheet,” n.d., http://library.duke.edu/divinity/help/citingwesley.pdf. (accessed 4 December 2010). I have provided greater detail on section and paragraph numbers etc than Heitzenrater’s style guide requires hopefully making it easier for the reader to locate the references in whichever edition of Wesley’s *Works* they choose to access.
may seem awkward to some I have chosen to do so in recognition of the fact that whilst Wesley was an historical figure his theology deals with matters which are relevant today. Therefore when writing of what Wesley believed or wrote I have used the past tense, and when writing of how he saw his theology being practically outworked I have used the present tense. An example relating to prevenient grace may help to explain this. When writing of Wesley’s belief I use the past tense. For example, Wesley believed in the presence of God’s prevenient grace in every human being. However when the subject is how he believed prevenient grace operates in human beings I use the present tense. For example, it is this prevenient grace that provides the first slightest hint that people need God. In this way I reflect that whilst Wesley’s belief is historical God continues to act in the present day and will continue to act in the future.

**Speaking of God**

Any non-inclusive language that remains in this thesis is pure oversight and I plead the defence of having lived for much of the last fifty years in a time when such non-inclusive language was the norm in the ecclesiological circles in which I was nurtured in my faith. That said, recognising the need to use inclusive language I have, wherever possible, attempted to do so throughout this work.

There is however one area where I find that more difficult to do. This is when referring to God. Wherever possible I have written in such a way as to avoid the need to use a personal pronoun. However in some places it does not make grammatical sense to do so. In such cases, whilst I tried to use current alternatives I found that they just do not sit right with me. In those few cases I have used masculine pronouns. I apologise in advance if this causes offence or in any way raises a barrier for the reader however having grown up “using “he” language for God” I find “most current alternatives sound impersonal to me, while the Christian God is deeply even essentially personal.”

**Definition**

There is one classification which permeates this thesis which I need to define. This is what I mean when I refer to a “child” or “children.” Recognising that this thesis aims to provide insights into the practical theology of John Wesley and its potential applicability

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in children’s ministry today I have chosen to take my cue from him in determining both the upper and lower age boundaries of childhood.

The upper boundary of childhood for the purpose of this thesis is therefore a child’s thirteenth birthday being the upper age limit at which Wesley believed a child’s worldview was most capable of being changed. This will become evident when we consider the maximum age at which he would admit a child to Kingswood School\(^{43}\) in chapter four.

As to the lower boundary this is the moment of birth, primarily because it is clear that Wesley believed childhood began at birth as will become obvious when we consider his views on education in chapter four especially. It also takes into account the connection in his theology between original sin, depravity and birth as we will see in chapter two.

Childhood then, in this thesis, is defined as that period in a person’s life from the moment of their birth to the last moment of their twelfth year. That is the last moment before their thirteenth birthday.

The question which arises is how well these boundaries accord with contemporary twenty-first century thinking. Considering first the upper age of childhood I note that there are varying definitions of this in New Zealand society. For instance, the Care of Children Act 2004 defines children as seventeen years of age and under whilst the Children, Young Persons, and Their Families Act 1989 defines them as fourteen years of age and under.\(^{44}\) To further complicate the issue a person under fourteen years of age is considered a child in terms of the criminal justice system\(^{45}\) but in the school system from the age of twelve their secondary education can begin (though the majority are thirteen when it does).\(^{46}\)


Child development can also provide indicators for the end of childhood. Some consider that the onset of puberty signals the end of childhood. However as children reach puberty at different times it is something of a moving target. As such it is difficult to define in terms of a numerical age and is therefore its applicability in determining an upper numerical age boundary for childhood is problematic. A numerical upper age limit is important in the context of this thesis given that it is numerical age to which Wesley generally refers when talking of children.

It is however the school system which best illustrates the thinking of most New Zealanders on this issue, I suggest. Whilst the school system does not define primary education as being for “children” and secondary education as being for “youth” nevertheless it is, I suggest, true that in the eyes of most New Zealanders the move from primary to secondary education marks the end of childhood. It is at this point, being thirteen years of age (or at least at the beginning of the next school year after they turn thirteen) that most people, including “children” themselves, consider they are no longer children but teenagers, adolescents or possibly even young adults. In saying this I acknowledge that some now see childhood as ending at around ten years of age.47

None of the legislation noted above defines a lower age as part of the definition of a child, legislators choosing rather to define children as being under a certain age. Is there any debate then as to when childhood starts? I would suggest that for most New Zealander’s there is not. The exceptions will be those who have particularly strong views regarding whether childhood begins prior to birth.48 Yet even they would agree that a person is a child from at least their birth.

The definition of childhood as beginning at birth and having an upper boundary of a child’s thirteenth birthday, with its origins in Wesley’s views, therefore accords well with contemporary thinking. As a result it will serve us well in both providing insights into the practical theology of John Wesley and into the potential applicability of that theology in children’s ministry in the twenty-first century.

47 This is a personal observation based on information obtained as the Convenor of the Children’s Ministry Task Group of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of New Zealand. In the course of defining the upper age limit for which the task group is responsible it became clear that some of our churches consider eleven year olds as “youth” rather than “children.”

48 In the debate that surrounds abortion the question of whether one is aborting an unborn child or not has been an issue since the beginnings of abortion law reform. The Life Resources Charitable Trust summarises the choice of words in this area with “Apparently, it is a baby if ‘wanted’ but a foetus (or other non-emotive term) if ‘unwanted.’” “The Evolution of Terminology | Word Games,” The Life Resources Charitable Trust, n.d., http://www.life.org.nz/abortion/aboutabortion/abortioncontroversy3/ (accessed 11 January 2010).
CHAPTER ONE

John Wesley

Here lieth the body of John Wesley a brand plucked out of the burning: who died of a consumption in the fifty-first year of his age, not leaving, after his debts are paid, ten pounds behind him: praying, God be merciful to me, an unprofitable servant.\(^1\)

These are the words that John Wesley ordered were to be inscribed on his gravestone as he thought he lay dying in 1753. Though they did not appear on his tombstone, after his eventual death in 1791,\(^2\) they nevertheless provide us with an insight into a man who had considerable influence throughout the eighteenth century and who continues to influence the lives of millions of people over two hundred years after his death.\(^3\)

As we contemplate John Wesley the man and the times in which he lived, in this chapter, we will come to see the significance of these words. That said this will be only a brief biographical and historical review aimed at providing sufficient contextual

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\(^2\) His tombstone in City Road, London, carries a much longer and more elaborate tribute. It records how he was raised up by God to “revive, enforce and defend The Pure Apostolical DOCTRINES and PRACTICES of THE PRIMITIVE CHURCH,” how he did this for more than 50 years; how he saw this begin to happen in the western world and how he provided for this work to continue “TO THE JOY OF FUTURE GENERATIONS.” Before recording the glory, and date, of his death the inscription concludes with an admonition to the reader which John Wesley would have approved of - “READER If thou art constrain’d to bless the INSTRUMENT, GIVE GOD THE GLORY.” “Inscription on John Wesley's Tombstone,” bobkaylor.typepad.com, November 30, 2009, http://bobkaylor.typepad.com/photos/a_tour_of_methodist_sites/wesleygraveinscription.html (accessed 30 November 2009).


information for our subsequent study of his theology. It is with the times in which he lived that we start as these provide us with the background to the development and implementation of that theology.

Life in Eighteenth Century England

Born on 17 June 1703, in Epworth, England, Wesley’s life spanned almost the entire eighteenth century before he died on Wednesday 2 March 1791, at City Road, London, England aged eighty-seven. As such he lived and ministered during a time of change, and a time of contrasts.

Change occurred in many areas. At the beginning of the century life revolved around religion and the church. The local church was the focus of community life in towns the length and breadth of England with more than ninety percent of the population claiming to be at least nominal adherents of the predominant denomination, the Church of England (Anglican). It was a time when it was believed that religion was hereditary so that, for instance, your father was a member of the Anglican Church so were you assumed to be. Whilst we cannot necessarily assume that

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6 With this in mind the current debate amongst historians as to the impact of secularisation, scientific discovery and the like on the religious faith of people in the eighteenth century is recognised but not discussed here as it is not of relevance to our consideration of children in the theology of John Wesley. Similarly with the debate over whether the Anglican Church was active and vital during the century or slumbering and ineffective which is acknowledged but not discussed as whilst it may have a bearing on why Methodism took such a hold amongst the poor of England it adds little, if anything, to the central question of this thesis being to identify if and where children are to be found in John Wesley’s theology and not whether this had any impact in the eighteenth century. That demands a separate study.


8 Olsen, Daily Life, xii.

9 For the sake of brevity I will generally, from this point, use “Anglican” when referring to the Church of England.

10 Jacob, Lay People and Religion, 224.

adherence meant one had their own faith it has been suggested that this was the last century in which having faith could be taken for granted as being the norm.\textsuperscript{12}

Religion pervaded most, if not all, aspects of life including social, cultural, political and benevolent activities.\textsuperscript{13} It provided the basis for how one participated in the political process and in so doing influenced the attitude one had toward the State. The moral expectations of the time were determined by it and how one saw themselves and their world was conditioned by it. No matter whether one conformed by being at least an adherent of the Anglican Church or dissented and participated in worship through any of the other denominations tolerated as part of the confessional state that England was at this time,\textsuperscript{14} one could not escape the influence of religion on every aspects of one’s life.\textsuperscript{15} Lest the reader gain the impression that this implies that lay people in the eighteenth century paid mere lip service to the tenets of Christianity I must point out that studies have shown that Christianity was central to the lives of most people and the great majority lived truly religious lives in accordance with the formularies of the Anglican Church.\textsuperscript{16}

The English social order was hegemonic in structure with the Anglican Church being the predominant denomination although the freedom to worship in other denominations was tolerated. At the same time it was a confessional state with power in the hands of Anglicans.\textsuperscript{17} This was underpinned by the symbiotic relationship between the Anglican Church and the State\textsuperscript{18} whereby Parliament determined Church matters in the same way that it did other matters of State such as foreign policy\textsuperscript{19} and in return it reinforced the Church’s position as the dominant denomination. This it did by limiting admission to Oxford and Cambridge Universities to Anglicans as well as denying non-Anglicans positions of authority in central and local government.\textsuperscript{20} Such was the closeness of this symbiotic relationship that the parish, as defined by the Church hierarchy as its basic unit of government, was also “the basic unit of local government.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{12} Gibson, \textit{Religion and Society}, 14.
\textsuperscript{13} Jacob, \textit{Lay People and Religion}, 4.
\textsuperscript{15} Gibson, \textit{Religion and Society}, 14.
\textsuperscript{17} Rule, \textit{Albion’s People}, 23, 25.
\textsuperscript{19} Gibson, \textit{Religion and Society}, 4.
\textsuperscript{20} Olsen, \textit{Daily Life}, 280.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
By the end of the century much had changed. Whilst scholars are divided on their relative importance, factors such as secularisation, industrialisation, urbanisation, the advance of science, heterodoxy, claims of nonconformists, negative attitudes of lay people toward the Church and the clergy, and legislative changes as the symbiotic relationship between the Anglican Church and the State broke down, have all been suggested as having an influence in religion losing much of its influence over the population as the century progressed. The number of Anglican communicants, for instance, had dropped to approximately ten percent of the eligible population by 1800.

The industrial revolution, which began during this century, also had a profound effect on society. At the time of Wesley’s birth the majority of people worked in a household context and economic activity was mainly at the domestic level. These households, comprising a wide range of people including family, servants and apprentices, were relatively stable though not static in terms of their place on the social and economic scales with people rising and falling as circumstances dictated. As industrialisation began to gather pace work moved from the home to the workshops of employers.

A further outcome of industrialisation was that the people of England became an increasingly mobile population both geographically and socially. Geographically this was seen in such phenomena as the spread of manufacturing into rural areas with the consequent fast growth in the non-farming population and increasing urbanisation as people sought to take advantage of the increased opportunities available in the growing towns and urban areas. It was also reflected in the distribution of the population which changed as a result of the growing industrialisation in the north.

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24 Jacob, Lay People and Religion, 1.
25 Ibid., 2.
26 Rule, Albion’s People, 7.
This geographic mobility was to be one of the reasons why the spiritual authority of the Anglican Church began to weaken and it has been suggested this is one reason why Methodism was able to flourish as it did. The archaic parish structure of the Anglican Church was simply not able to keep up with the speed at which these villages increased in number, population and physical size. The Anglican Church was unable to build enough new church buildings or to increase the seating capacity of its existing churches fast enough. The latter was a result primarily of the church’s inability to convince those who owned box pews to allow them to be removed, so that more bench pews could be installed. So it was that the ratio of worshippers to seats in Anglican churches was inexcusably high in the north. This of course was not a problem for Methodism given Wesley’s approval of field preaching hence the suggestion that this is one reason Methodism flourished in these areas at the expense of the established Church.

Socially one impact came as those who migrated to the towns and urban areas were, for a time at least, not part of a household unit with the consequent disruption of the traditional social life which, as we have seen, was communal in nature at the beginning of the century. This was particularly obvious when the migrant attempted to attend their new local church but found no seat available as the Anglican Church failed to keep pace with the societal changes and continued to allow seats to be allocated on the basis of a family and communal based society. Simply put there was no room for the migrant in their local Anglican church. In addition the demands of new work schedules and employers conflicted with the demands of weekday services so that people were less able to attend church as often as they once had. Consequently attendances at worship began to drop.

The eighteenth century in England can also be described as a time of contrasts. On the surface the relative ease of the life of the aristocratic class, the wealthy merchant  

30 Ibid.
31 Two types of pews were to be found in Anglican churches in the eighteenth century – the standard bench pew “and the more expensive, lavishly upholstered box pews, owned by wealthy families. The box pews took up enormous amounts of space that could have been used for several bench pews, but box pews were owned by the families, not the church, and they could not be removed without the permission of the owners. The owners, conscious of their status, were hardly eager to volunteer their box pews for destruction.” Olsen, Daily Life, 282-83.
32 Ibid.
34 Jacob, Lay People and Religion, 17, 228.
and indeed the affluent rector gave the impression of a society at ease with itself. It was a society that appeared confident in the belief that England had come of age and had grown beyond the barbarities of its past. Those who governed - the landed gentry - were a picture of a prosperous and ordered society. There was indeed much that pointed to this being “the best of times” for people in England.\textsuperscript{35}

But without too much probing one could identify the less refined, somewhat cruder aspects of daily life. The morals of this society were just as varied as at any time in human history. Drinking, gambling, disease, high taxes, and poverty, were part of the daily life of large numbers of the population throughout the length and breadth of England. Life was lived amidst the threat of riots as mob culture was prevalent, it being the only way that the ordinary person could potentially be heard, they having no other public voice. War was also a constant threat, criminals were transported to the distant colonies and public executions were commonplace. Alongside all this were the unsettling changes to trade, communication, transportation, agriculture, and the like brought about by industrialisation.\textsuperscript{36}

This was the culture within which Wesley lived and into which he worked to “spread scriptural holiness.”\textsuperscript{37} It was a culture and an environment that some have suggested was, like France, ripe for revolution and that but for Wesley England would also have suffered such a revolution.\textsuperscript{38} As appealing as this is to those who would seek to further enhance Wesley’s influence it is unlikely to have been the reality of the situation. As J.C.D. Clark, V.H.H. Green and others have shown conditions in England were very different from those existing in France at the time. A revolution of the like which occurred in France was therefore improbable.\textsuperscript{39}

That said John Rule comments that historians have seen that Methodism may have been a stabilising force which mitigated “the threat of revolution.”\textsuperscript{40} This accords with the work of Green who suggests that it is possible that the energies of the working class were diverted by Methodism into more social, rather than political, activities. For

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{35} Olsen, \textit{Daily Life}, xii; Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 1.
\bibitem{37} John Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others; From the Year 1744, to the Year 1789,” in \textit{The Works of John Wesley, vol 8: Addresses, Essays, and Letters}, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), question. 3, 299.
\bibitem{38} Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 157.
\bibitem{40} Rule, \textit{Albion’s People}, 154.
\end{thebibliography}
example, through Methodism people were taught to attend to their own spiritual condition and to help others with theirs. At the same time they were taught to be content with their existence while working to improve society in general.\textsuperscript{41}

We will never know for certain whether or not Wesley and/or Methodism saved England from revolution but we do know that, as we shall see in a later chapter, he encouraged Christians to practise the means of grace, and in particular the service means of grace.\textsuperscript{42} The energies of Methodists especially, were therefore focused on changing society through social reformation, rather than political revolution, as Green suggests.\textsuperscript{43}

This being the case we must conclude that Wesley, as the founder of Methodism, positively impacted society in eighteenth century England but what was it about him that enabled him to do so? What were the events in his life which caused him to initiate and passionately maintain revival? The answers to these questions will become clearer as we consider a brief biographical sketch of John Wesley the man.

**John Wesley – A Brief Biography**

As we consider Wesley’s life we acknowledge again that this can only be a brief biography of a man whose life has been considered in detail, from many angles, by many others.\textsuperscript{44} Nevertheless it will be sufficient to enable us to contextualise the study of Wesley’s theology which we will undertake in the following chapters.

**Life in the Epworth Rectory**

In order to do so it is important that we understand a little of his life in the Epworth Rectory where he was born on 17 June 1703 to Samuel (Rector of Epworth Parish)\textsuperscript{45} and Susanna Wesley. Of the seventeen or nineteen children Susanna bore, nine survived into adulthood of which John was one of three boys.\textsuperscript{46} His eldest brother, Samuel junior, was sent to Westminster for school when John was about one. His other

\textsuperscript{41} Green, *John Wesley*, 157.
\textsuperscript{42} We will look at these in a later chapter.
\textsuperscript{43} Green, *John Wesley*, 156-57.
\textsuperscript{44} For more detailed biographies of John Wesley see, for instance, Vickers, *Wesley*; Abraham, *Wesley for Armchair Theologians*; Tomkins, *John Wesley*; and Green, *John Wesley*.
\textsuperscript{45} Green, *John Wesley*, 9.
\textsuperscript{46} Samuel Rogal, *Susanna Annesley Wesley (1669-1742): A Biography of Strength and Love: (The Mother of John and Charles Wesley)* (Bristol Ind.: Wyndham Hall, 2001), 70.
brother was Charles, four years his junior, with whom he would later lead the Methodist revival.\textsuperscript{47}

Together with the almost continual child-bearing Susanna was a proficient housekeeper, a more than competent household manager, a gifted educator, widely read, and exercised strict control over her large family.\textsuperscript{48} Her skills as an educator and her proficiency in managing her family are worth our attention as they influenced Wesley in his views, particularly regarding education, as we shall in a later chapter.

Susanna believed that children are born with a rebellious will as the result of original sin and that the child’s will must be broken as early as possible in its life. It was her conviction that the child must learn to submit to the parent’s will for the parent’s will is to the child what God's will is to the adult. In other words, by learning to submit to its parent’s will the child is better able to recognise the need to submit to God's will.\textsuperscript{49} Stephen Tomkins comments that the struggle against original sin shaped her child-rearing philosophy.\textsuperscript{50}

The children were given one year of grace. During this time Susanna trained them into regular sleeping and eating patterns using soft and subtle methods. Made to observe the Sabbath from the beginning of life, the Wesley children also learnt the Lord's Prayer as soon as they could talk. This they were required to say morning and evening. To this were added other prayers as well as Bible readings (which they were required to memorise) as they grew older. Accordingly by the time they were adults all the Wesley children knew much of the Bible by heart with some able to recite whole books.\textsuperscript{51}

Their formal school education began on the day after their fifth birthday with all the Wesley children being home-schooled by Susanna. The school day was strictly controlled with no room for loud talking or playing. Whilst the Wesley children were initially allowed to play outside school hours, this was only as a family and never with the local village children. With their return from being billeted with other families after the fire of 1709, the significance of which will become clear shortly, even this small concession to childhood ceased as Susanna attempted to correct the rude and

\textsuperscript{47} Rogal, \textit{Susanna Wesley}, 70; Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 12; Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 11.
\textsuperscript{48} Rogal, \textit{Susanna Wesley}, 55-56; Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 10; Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 10.
\textsuperscript{50} Rogal, \textit{Susanna Wesley}, 57-58; Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 13.
\textsuperscript{51} Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 13.
clownish behaviour they had learnt. From that time on, and for a large part of Wesley’s childhood in the rectory, the children were required to read “the Psalms for the day, and a chapter in the New Testament.” In the process playing ceased to be part of John’s childhood. Whether in spite of, or because of, his mother’s seemingly harsh disciplinary methods, Wesley appears to have enjoyed his childhood. Certainly her methods did not lessen the affection in which he held her and he owed much to her. It was she who developed his early faith and it is from her that he developed the personal morality and integrity which was to be central to his life and from which he never swerved.

Our brief look at Wesley’s upbringing in the Epworth Rectory would not be complete without considering one of the most formative events of his life. This was the fire of 9 February 1709 when he was five years old. For the second time the rectory caught fire but this time as the family gathered outside with neighbours, having all escaped the flames, a cry was heard from the attic. After repeated attempts by Samuel to rescue John, via the stairs, were thwarted by the flames, the family knelt to commend his soul to God. As they were praying Wesley’s face appeared at the window and he was eventually saved by men forming a human ladder standing on each other’s shoulders.

It was this experience which inspired Wesley to describe himself with the biblical phrase “a brand plucked out of the burning.” For him it eloquently expressed the truth that God had spared him from death. As we have seen, so important was this to him that he wanted it inscribed on his gravestone so that it would be how he was remembered.

Wesley’s life-long penchant for analysing and deliberating over everything began to reveal itself after the fire. It was around this time that he became “serious in religion” at

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52 Wesley, “Journal Entry for August 1, 1742,” 391.
54 Green, John Wesley, 10-11.
55 There is some question as to whether this was an accident or arson on the part of disgruntled parishioners who were not happy with Samuel’s ministry. Certainly Samuel blamed the parishioners. Tomkins, John Wesley, 6.
56 Ibid., 6-7.
57 These words are taken from Amos 4:11 and Zech 3:2 (KJV). Wesley, “Journal Entry for November 26, 1753,” 309.
least according to his own later recollection.\textsuperscript{58} Also from this early age Wesley became known for his habit of questioning all things based on his assumption that everything related to humanity is backed by logical reasons and his desire to know what they were.\textsuperscript{59}

Wesley’s upbringing in the Epworth Rectory came to an end in January 1714, at the age of ten. It was then that he was sent to Charterhouse School in London.\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{Pre Aldersgate}

From Charterhouse School, Wesley enrolled at Christ Church in Oxford on 24 June 1720 staying long enough to attain his Masters degree. With his employment options effectively limited to either education or the priesthood, and with both his parents steering him towards the latter, he then began preparations to be ordained in the Anglican Church.\textsuperscript{61}

However he felt unprepared for such a life so, as was his way, he examined the state of his soul to see whether he, himself, had any reasonable hope of being saved. In so doing he began an investigation into his own weaknesses which would lead to a life devoted to correcting them. That examination led to the development of the rule which was to be foundational for his life

\begin{quote}
Whenever you are to do an action, consider how Christ did or would do the like and you are to imitate his example.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

This, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter, was Wesley’s definition of a life of holiness. It is therefore not surprising that it was also at this time that he began writing new rules for himself in a quest to attain greater holiness in his own life. These rules being designed to govern how he would live and how his time would be spent as well as the kind of company he would avoid and the attitudes he intended to cultivate.\textsuperscript{63}

Wesley was ordained a deacon on 19 September 1725 by Bishop Potter of Oxford\textsuperscript{64} and ordained into the priesthood in 1728 at Oxford.\textsuperscript{65} After his ordination

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{58}Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 15.
\item \textsuperscript{59}Ibid., 16.
\item \textsuperscript{61}Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 22-23; Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 14.
\item \textsuperscript{62}Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 26.
\item \textsuperscript{63}Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 23, 26; Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 14-15, 21-22.
\item \textsuperscript{64}He could not be ordained in 1725 as he was "just short of canonical age." Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 15.
\end{itemize}
Wesley's reading and study focused increasingly on his main area of theological interest, which was the adaption of theology to everyday life. That is to say he was a practical theologian.\(^6\) This must not be read to mean, however, that he neglected other areas of study. For instance, his reading also brought him into contact with mystical theology, a subject which he also became vitally interested in. It was his reading of books such as *Pugna Spiritualis* (Lorenzo Scupoli)\(^67\) and Henry Scougal's *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* which introduced him to the idea that in order to attain unity with God one must first renounce one's self. His later single-minded pursuit of Christian perfection (holiness) can be attributed in large part to this reading as well as a narrowing of his own interests as time passed.\(^68\)

Seven years later (October 1735) saw John and Charles Wesley, in the company of Charles Delamotte and Benjamin Ingham, leaving England bound for Georgia in the American colonies.\(^69\) Whatever the goals of the others in this party Wesley's personal aim was to save his own soul. He also wanted to practice unhampered the goals of holiness and of moulding others in a holy way neither of which he had been able to do to his satisfaction in England.\(^70\)

This mission trip is notable for two reasons in particular. Firstly there were a number of problems which resulted in the mission being spectacularly unsuccessful. This is not the place to delve deeply into these but we note that these issues included a difference between Wesley's desire to evangelise the North American Indians and the expectation of James Oglethorpe, founder of the colony, that he not neglect the pastoral needs of the colonists. There was also the divergence between his idealised view of the Indians and the reality of the situation which was that they were, in his judgment, far more corrupt in nature than he imagined and had no desire to be saved.\(^71\)

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 18.
\(^{67}\) This was amongst his mother's favourite books according to Green, *John Wesley*, 20.
\(^{68}\) Ibid.
\(^{70}\) Tomkins, *John Wesley*, 43.
\(^{71}\) Green comments that Wesley began his Georgian ministry with an idealised picture of the North American Indians which he was forced to revise when he found them to be lawless and lacking any sense of order or decency. Quoting Wesley's journal entry for 7 October 1737 in which Wesley notes that he could find no Indian who wished to be "instructed" ("Journal Entry for October 7, 1737," in *The Works of John Wesley, vol 1: Journals from October 14, 1735 to
Finally, but by no means least, there was his unfortunate relationship with eighteen-year-old Sophey Hopkey (later Mrs Williamson) which resulted in him being found guilty of writing to her against the consent of her husband. This was what finally brought his ministry in the colony to an end as his congregation deserted him in large numbers. Wesley returned to England less sure of his faith than when he had set out just over two years previously.\textsuperscript{72}

It was also on this mission trip, specifically during the voyage to America that Wesley was to first encounter the Moravian Brethren whose spirituality would later greatly influence Methodism. Having worshipped with the Moravians during a particularly bad storm, he identified a number of differences between their theology and his own, including their emphasis on justification by faith which the English church had lost. A second difference was one he identified during his later encounter with the leader of the American Moravians, August Spangenberg, whilst the Simmonds (the ship which had transported Wesley to America) was anchored off an offshore island. It was Spangenberg who introduced him to the idea that one could be assured of salvation. At the time this caused him a great deal of anxiety but later it would bring him a sense of relief that he was indeed saved.\textsuperscript{73}

Whilst the time in Georgia did not live up to his expectations, nevertheless it did help Wesley realise that his isolationist approach to pursuing holiness was not in accord with that of the Jesus on whom he sought to model his life. It was at this point that he understood that his approach to mission had been incorrect. Rather than spurning the North American Indians as an unholy rabble he realised he should have been working amongst them, as Jesus did. By doing so, like Jesus, he would have been modelling holiness as an itinerant preacher amongst the sinful masses. The outcome of this epiphany was that on his return to England he began itinerant preaching in earnest, taking every opportunity to preach the necessity of faith and spiritual rebirth.\textsuperscript{74}

Wesley’s main personal concern at this time was still the state of his own soul and with that of his own personal faith. His studies of the apostolic church, combined with his own experiences, convinced him that he lacked faith in the justifying grace of God.

\textsuperscript{72} Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 34-55; Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 38-52.
\textsuperscript{73} Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 45-49.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 56-57.
This he wanted more than anything else. As he wrestled with this and other tensions over the coming months he lost confidence in himself and in doing so opened himself, without realising it, to being able to receive the doctrine of justification as explained to him by the Moravian missionary, Peter Böhler. After many conversations between the two, Wesley was convinced that he was attempting to obtain salvation by works and that he lacked true instantaneous saving faith, the saving faith that brought with it spiritual rebirth as well as assurance of salvation. With this realisation Wesley was now where God needed him to be as he was drawn to the meeting in Aldersgate St.

**Aldersgate**

As we come to the events of 24 May 1738 we do so recognising that several scholars have questioned whether this was indeed Wesley’s “evangelical conversion” in the way it is traditionally seen amongst Methodists. Recognising that not everything about his life can be covered in this brief overview we will not consider those arguments in detail here, rather noting that the details can be found in the work of scholars such as Tomkins, Green, and Albert C. Outler to which the interested reader is referred. That said we note that the same scholars agree that something happened for Wesley that night which was to affect not only his life but that of many others.

In order to understand what happened we would be wise, I suggest, to accept Wesley’s own words in his long journal entry for that day in which he describes not only the events of that night but also his spiritual journey to that point and the temptations he endured on his return home afterwards. He writes

> In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was

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75 Tomkins, *John Wesley*, 58; Green, *John Wesley*, 54-55.
given me, that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.\textsuperscript{80}

So how significant an event was this in Wesley’s life? With Outler I suggest that Aldersgate saw Wesley recognise the fusion between justifying faith and the sure and certain knowledge that by, through and in Christ his sins had been forgiven and he was now reconciled back into God's favour. Clearly Wesley was a man with, and on, a mission. A man aware of himself and within that awareness secure on the rock-steady foundation of an assurance of salvation which may have been attained elsewhere but which was certainly received also at Aldersgate.\textsuperscript{81}

The significance of Wesley’s Aldersgate experience does not rely on whether it was or was not his evangelical conversion. Rather it lies in the fact that it was here that he finally received the assurance that, through his personal trust in Christ, his sins were forgiven and he was saved. With that assurance he could, and would, go out to spread the good news that salvation is available to all who believe. This, as we shall see, was a key doctrinal conviction he held to as part of his theology.

Post Aldersgate

Three weeks after his Aldersgate experience Wesley left England to visit the Moravian communities in Germany. He was impressed by much of what he saw noting for instance that the community was divided according to sex and marital status into “choirs” and that each choir was further subdivided into “bands” of five to seven people who met weekly to hold each other accountable in their Christian walk. As we shall see this structure was to be echoed in his later organisation of the Methodists.\textsuperscript{82}

Wesley was not entirely uncritical of the Moravians however being particularly concerned with the amount of control exercised by their leader Count Zinzendorf. This, and other concerns which strengthened over the years, meant that whilst he admired the Moravians he could not become one himself. Just two years later, in 1740, he was to distance himself from them because he disagreed with their doctrine of “stillness.” This doctrine went against his own experience in that it taught that one should abstain

\textsuperscript{81} Outler, John Wesley, 17-18, 52-53.
\textsuperscript{82} Tomkins, John Wesley, 62; Green, John Wesley, 63, 78.
from the visible means of grace, for example communion and corporate worship, as well as from doing good works until one was assured of their own conversion.\textsuperscript{83}

On his return to England Wesley began to divide his time between London and Oxford. He preached the message of salvation wherever and whenever he could including in the workhouses and prisons where, in the latter, he especially preached to those condemned to die.\textsuperscript{84} He was convinced that God had called him to take this message to all who were prepared to listen and so not only did he preach four times on his first full day in a town but he published his sermons so those who could not hear him could at least read God's message.\textsuperscript{85}

So it was that Wesley began an itinerant ministry which would see him travel an estimated two hundred and fifty thousand miles, give away thirty thousand pounds (enough to have kept a gentleman for a decade) and preach in excess of forty thousand sermons over the next fifty three years.\textsuperscript{86} In doing so he preached in many dioceses of the Anglican Church, not allowing himself to be constrained by the normal ecclesiastical practice of a priest being commissioned to preach in a particular diocese, as he saw “all the world as my parish.”\textsuperscript{87}

It was over the course of the year following his experience at Aldersgate that Wesley was to make four decisions which would ultimately result in the formation of the movement known as Methodism. These were

- His approval of field preaching.\textsuperscript{88}

Wesley recorded how he was barred from preaching in churches. However he knew he was called of God to preach so, recognising that God is present outside church buildings also, he preached in the open fields.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{83} Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 64.
\textsuperscript{84} Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 64. See also Wesley’s comments to the Bishop of Bristol in “Conversation with the Bishop of Bristol,” in \textit{The Works of John Wesley, vol 13: Letters}, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 501.
\textsuperscript{85} Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 64.
\textsuperscript{86} Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 199; Green, \textit{John Wesley}, 67.
\textsuperscript{88} Allen, “Foreword,” 17.
\textsuperscript{89} Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” 28-29.
• His approval of lay preaching.\textsuperscript{90}

In the absence of sufficient numbers of ordained people to preach, Wesley concluded he had no choice but to approve suitably qualified lay people (initially only men but later women) to undertake this vital task.

• His decision to provide permanent buildings in which the societies could meet.\textsuperscript{91}

This resulted in the first Methodist chapel being built in Bristol in 1739. In addition to providing an indoor preaching place for the local societies the Bristol chapel served as a school for local children.\textsuperscript{92} As such it was one of the earliest examples of Wesley's interest in the education of children which would later see him establish Kingswood School.\textsuperscript{93}

• His organisation of new Christians for the purposes of discipleship.\textsuperscript{94}

Wesley knew that in order for a person to continue on their discipleship journey (sanctification) having experienced the new birth it was vital that they receive ongoing training and encouragement as well as the support and discipline of a Christian community. So it was that he fashioned the movement which was to become known as Methodism with its structure of societies, classes, and bands,\textsuperscript{95} as a means of leading all people into, and discipling them along the way of, Christian truth and action.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{90} Allen, "Foreword," 17.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{92} Tomkins, John Wesley, 75.


\textsuperscript{94} Allen, “Foreword,” 17.

\textsuperscript{95} As the number of new Christians grew Wesley organised them into geographically based societies “in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they might help each other to work out their salvation.” The only criteria for admission was “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from their sins.” In order to promote greater accountability Wesley subsequently divided each society into mixed (that is young and old, men and women) groups called classes. However the mixed design of these classes stifled people’s ability to confess their most intimate sins and so, in response to the people’s request, Wesley divided the classes into smaller groups called bands. The bands were structured so as to segregate the married from the unmarried and the men from the women. There were therefore separate bands for single women, single men, married women and married men. John Wesley, “A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists in a Letter to the Reverend Mt. Perronet, Vicar of Shoreham, in Kent. Written in the Year 1748,” in The Works of John Wesley, vol 8: Addresses, Essays, and Letters, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), I.7,8., 250; IV.2, 256-257; John Wesley, “The Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies in London, Bristol, Kingswood, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, &c,” in The Works of John Wesley, vol 8: Addresses, Essays, and Letters, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), para 1-7., 269-71.

\textsuperscript{96} Green, John Wesley, 7-8.
Later (1744) saw the beginnings of the Methodist connexion when Wesley integrated the many societies into a network which amongst other things enabled a sharing of resources and provided him with the opportunity to demand conformity to his rules and theology. In this way he could ensure that members and leaders were all doctrinally, morally and organizationally sound.97

It is difficult to think of any one person who had more of an effect on their century, or who achieved as much in their lifetime, or for that matter affected the future more, than John Wesley. He dedicated his life, particularly that post his Aldersgate experience, to doing all that he could to bring people into the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and to empower them to enter into a right relationship with God.98 By emphasising the personal nature of true Christianity he confronted the spiritual indifference of his times. Through his evangelistic endeavours he brought the gospel to thousands who may not otherwise have heard it and as a result was instrumental in leading thousands into the kingdom of God in his lifetime. Such is his influence that the effects of his life and work continue to be felt in the twenty-first century, over two hundred years after his death. This is no more obvious than in the lives of the approximately one million new Christians added to the Kingdom of God every year as a result of the work of those who consider themselves part of the John Wesley family of churches.99

Wesley died on Wednesday 2 March 1791, aged eighty-seven100 with his funeral service being held at five am the following Wednesday. This early time was set so as to avoid the crowds and provide him with the funeral he desired - one with the simplest of rites. However the crowds were not to be beaten such was their desire to farewell this man who, it has been said, influenced the course of the eighteenth century more than any of his contemporaries.101

97 Tomkins, *John Wesley*, 115.
99 As noted earlier that part of the body of Christ which traces its ancestry, so to speak, to the ministry of John Wesley and which belongs to the World Methodist Council is currently represented in 130 countries. The total membership of approximately forty-three million, is directly reaching over seventy-five million people, and through their efforts about one million new Christians are being added to the Kingdom of God each year. World Methodist Council, *World Methodist Council: Handbook of Information, 2006-2011*, 279; Waugh, “From the National Superintendent Rev Richard Waugh,” 2; Freeman, “World Methodist Council - From the General Secretary” (accessed 14 May 2009).
100 Wesley, “Life of John Wesley (Jackson, vol 5),” 45.
101 Tomkins, *John Wesley*, 194.
With this appreciation of Wesley’s life and some understanding of the century in which he lived we now have sufficient background to be able to understand the development of his theology, which we will review in the next chapter.
In a word, holiness is the having “the mind that was in Christ,” and the “walking as Christ walked.”

With these words, written in what he thought might be his last sermon, Wesley succinctly defined holiness. This was one of the two key themes in his theology, the other being the primacy of God’s grace. As a practical theologian, he applied himself conscientiously throughout most of his lifetime to the key task of articulating these twin themes. He sought to see lives changed and diligently sought to shape the worldview and practice of believers in the world so that they could be equipped to live sanctified, holy lives. This is to say, that he desired “to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”

In the last chapter, our aim was to gain an understanding of John Wesley the man and the context in which he ministered. Here our task is to gain an overview of his theology in order to consider the place of children in that theology in the next chapter. Of necessity, given the breadth of his reflections, this can only be a very brief, focused

2 Wesley records in his Journal for 26 March 1790, less than a year before his death “I finished my sermon on the Wedding Garment; perhaps the last that I shall write.” The Works of John Wesley, vol 4: Journals from September 13, 1773 to October 24, 1790, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 483. Outler notes that it was not actually his last written sermon but it is one of his most important. It was published in two parts in the Arminian Magazine; with the first part appearing in March 1791, (he died 2 March 1791). John Wesley, The Works of John Wesley, vol 4: Sermons IV, 115-151, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial Edition. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 140-41.
5 Our aim here is not to comment on his theology but to provide a foundation of knowledge such that we can later identify whether children are within its purview. No attempt is therefore made to interact with any scholarship that questions or, for that matter affirms, the correctness or integrity of Wesley’s theology.
glimpse at key aspects of his theology. Our consideration of his “doctrinal convictions” will, therefore, be adequate if the knowledge we gain is such that we can use it as an appropriate base from which to determine whether, and if so how, Wesley saw children in his theology.

A key challenge here is how to present the material. Wesley was not a systematic theologian\(^6\) and this makes the task of organising any survey of his theology an interesting one. The organisation of my survey of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions owes its genesis to those used by Randy L. Maddox\(^8\) and Collins\(^9\) in their recent books on Wesley’s theology. In organising the material I have opted for an organisation that I believe reflects the twin themes of Wesley’s theology being the primacy of God’s grace, and the importance of holiness.

**God of Grace\(^{10}\)**

Wesley’s theology began with God. For him God is the source of our salvation.\(^{11}\) God is the source of all that is good including anything good done by humans.\(^{12}\) In this way, Wesley’s theology began with God’s goodness and moved to humanity’s free will not vice versa.\(^{13}\)

In order to better understand what this means we will first reflect on the attributes of God. We will then turn our attention to considering how those attributes work themselves out in God’s goodness and grace.

**Attributes of God**

For Wesley there is only one God and he is good in all respects. God’s goodness cannot be restricted, limited, or qualified in any way for it is an innate attribute of God, part of his very being.\(^{14}\)

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\(^6\) Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 25.


\(^8\) Maddox, *Responsible Grace*.

\(^9\) Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*.

\(^10\) I am indebted to Maddox, *Responsible Grace*; and Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley* for the inspiration behind the titles of the sections that follow wherein I discuss Wesley’s theology.


\(^13\) Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 111, 112.

\(^14\) Ibid., 108-111.
It was this belief in the innate goodness of God, which caused Wesley to reject the doctrine of predestination as espoused by Calvin, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and others, for instance.\(^5\) He did not take issue with the doctrine that God predestines who will be saved. However, he rejected the idea that God predestines only some for salvation for it implies that God also predestines the rest of humanity for reprobation – an idea he called double predestination. This was anathema to Wesley because it required that God must act against his innate nature thereby destroying all God's innate attributes and making him worse than the devil. Rather Wesley’s theology was that the innate goodness of God places a limit on how God can use his power. Specifically it prevents God predestining some people for reprobation. We can put it this way - God chooses not to practise double predestination, though God has the power to do so, because to do so would go against God's very essence.\(^6\)

God is also sovereign in Wesley’s theology, for to be anything other would limit his interaction with creation. This would have been unthinkable to Wesley. He held that God created the world and everything in it without any constraint by anyone or anything. He further believed that God is active in creation, preserving and governing all things both great and small.\(^7\)

Before leaving our discussion of the attributes of God, as identified by Wesley, we note that he was convinced that the very essence of God’s nature and character was love. This was absolutely critical and vital to his theology and, accordingly, he based his theology on it.\(^8\)

With Wesley’s understanding of God’s attributes in mind, we turn to consider how he saw these manifesting themselves in God's interaction with humanity. We begin with the goodness of God.

### The Goodness of God

For Wesley the goodness of God is the source of all goodness in humanity and human beings can do nothing good without God's supernatural grace. In his doctrine of grace, he made it clear that we cannot take any credit for doing good works. Rather, Wesley's

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\(^{8}\) Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 109-111.
view was that whatever good is in people, or indeed whatever good people do, is only possible because “God is the author and doer of it.”\(^{19}\) That is, people can only do good works because God's grace works within them and the Holy Spirit gives them the freedom, and ability, to do good.\(^{20}\)

**The Sovereignty of God**

God’s sovereignty meant that for Wesley God not only creates everything but also maintains everything and it is possible to see God’s hand in all things. As such, God is not only Creator but also Governor of all things. As Creator, God created a special place for humans both naturally and spiritually. This special place is one where humanity can be satisfied and prosper. As Governor, God rewards and punishes, acting as an impartial judge guided by unwavering justice. In doing so, the holiness that defines the divinity of God sets the parameters within which God operates.\(^{21}\)

Wesley would say then, that God chose to create humanity as “free, responsible moral beings.”\(^{22}\) He would also say that God has the right to, and does, reward and punish humanity because God is sovereign and holy.\(^{23}\)

**The Love of God**

For Wesley the love of God was the foundation for understanding God’s interaction with humanity and the basic tenet on which his theology rested.\(^{24}\) The very fact that scripture\(^{25}\) records that “God is love” and not as he said “God is justice” or “God is truth” was evidence enough for Wesley that love is what uniquely defines God. For him, God’s goodness flows from this love and it is this love that God extends to all creation, being the good and the bad person alike as well as God’s works.\(^{26}\)

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\(^{19}\) Wesley, “Sermon 128, "Free Grace"," para. 3, 374.

\(^{20}\) Wesley, “Sermon 128, "Free Grace"," para. 3, 374; Olson, Arminian Theology, 150; Abraham, Wesley for Armchair Theologians, 77.


\(^{22}\) Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 39.

\(^{23}\) Wesley, “Thoughts Upon God’s Sovereignty,” 362-63; Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 38.

\(^{24}\) Olson, Arminian Theology, 109.

\(^{25}\) 1 John 4:8.

Accordingly, Wesley was able to preach that everyone is a child of God, that God makes his grace available to all, and that the love of God is the source of humanity’s salvation. In doing so Wesley was, as Maddox comments, able to hold in tension the two truths that it is only by God’s grace that people can be saved and yet God’s grace will not save a person unless they accept it with divine grace-empowered involvement.

Prevenient Grace – God of Grace Drawing Us

With our understanding of the attributes of God as Wesley understood them, we are better placed to be able to appreciate his theology as it relates to the interaction between God and humanity. We begin our exploration of this by considering his doctrines of the fallen nature of humanity and of prevenient grace.

As we have seen, Wesley believed that the sovereign God chose to create and maintain our world as a special place for human beings both naturally and spiritually. As such, when God created it, it was to be a place where human beings created in the imago Dei, and created for love, could be satisfied and prosper. Into this world God created and placed human beings in order that they could have a relationship with him as creatures designed to know, to love, and enjoy [their] Creator to all eternity.

God chose not to force this relationship on humans however, rather choosing to allow them free will. Whilst we may suppose that this action would undermine God’s sovereignty this was not the view that Wesley took. Rather he saw God’s sovereignty being made known by, and being felt through, the free will of humanity. With this view, Wesley carefully balanced the concept of free will with the sovereignty of God.

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28 Maddox, Responsible Grace, 19.
Accordingly, against the backdrop of an environment specifically created for their natural and spiritual well-being, humans are free to make their own decisions including whether to know, love and obey God. In choosing to disobey God and eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve chose to exercise that freedom. This is, of course, the doctrine of the fall.

For Wesley the fall resulted from Adam’s rejection of the moral law and as a consequence his rejection of the presence of God. Jason Vickers notes that in doing so, Adam in Wesley’s view, saw himself as “the sole lord and sovereign of his own actions.” Vickers also helpfully suggests that Wesley may have felt it more appropriate to refer to this as the doctrine of the “leap.” This would better reflect Wesley’s view of the deliberateness of Adam’s act given that the term “fall” suggests an accidental stumble into sin.

However it is described, the fall gave freedom to the inherent sinful nature of humanity that became our default setting. A setting which Wesley described with terms such as, being in debt, in bondage and diseased. In this state humanity is in bondage to sin and unable to know, obey and love God without God’s divine prevenient grace.

This is the doctrine of original sin, as Wesley understood it. He was firmly Arminian in this understanding agreeing fully with the doctrine as espoused by Jacobus Arminius. In this view, the fall saw the end of any natural goodness that humanity possessed which Wesley translated as meaning that humans do not possess any innate goodness or moral ability.

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32 Abraham, Wesley for Armchair Theologians, 47.
36 Whilst recognising the validity of Vickers’ view I have chosen to continue to use “the Fall” as it is the more well known and accepted phrase.
38 Abraham, Wesley for Armchair Theologians, 48; Vickers, Wesley, 90; Olson, Arminian Theology, 57; Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 64.
39 Olson, Arminian Theology, 149.
He attached considerable emphasis to this doctrine considering it one of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. So important was it to him that over a nine-month period, beginning 30 November 1756, he wrote his large treatise *The Doctrine of Original Sin, According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience* to refute an earlier work on the doctrine by Dr. John Taylor.

Wesley's writings on the doctrine of original sin have been examined in depth by scholars including Collins, Maddox, and Roger E. Olson and I will not attempt to do so here except to note that Wesley went so far as to say that if one denies the doctrine of original sin then one is not Christian. In so doing, he made the doctrine part of the very definition of what it means to be a Christian. Additionally for Wesley, people can only recognise the depth of God's grace and love if they first fully comprehend the depths of sin resulting from the fall.

As a faithful Arminian Wesley also believed that only when people recognise that there is a God and that they need that God can they move away from the state of spiritual helplessness that results from original sin and turn toward God. Such recognition is not possible though because in their natural state people are totally devoid of the grace of God and see themselves as sole lord and sovereign of their own actions.

However as Collins notes Wesley did not believe that such a person, which is to say, one who is totally devoid of the grace of God, existed. Rather it was Wesley's theology that every person has the grace of God within him or her. Further, as Olson comments, Wesley was an optimist of grace and did not agree with the Reformed doctrine of total depravity, which taught that “humans are as bad as they can possibly

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44 Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 73-83.
45 Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 148-150.
be.” Olson observes that as an optimist of grace Wesley’s preference, at times, was to describe the state of humanity (i.e. corrupt and unrighteous) as “deprivation.”

For Wesley then, people are deprived because their total depravity is mitigated by the presence of the prevenient grace of God. At no time is a human being totally depraved, in his view, because this prevenient grace is present in every human being at birth. It is this prevenient grace that provides the first slightest hint that people need God. It is prevenient grace that awakens the first faintest stirrings of good will toward God such that people begin to realise that they have sinned and that they need God. Prevenient grace is therefore the initiating factor in their move towards God for without it they cannot move toward God. It draws them toward faith allowing grace to work within them.

Wesley also believed that prevenient grace is unconditional and is provided by God without humans asking for help. It is a universal gift given to all and because of this he could say that any, and all, moves humans may make to overcome sin and its effects in their lives is the work of God first, foremost and entirely. It is God therefore, who empowers humans to recognise their problem of sin and to look to overcome it. Seen this way prevenient grace is the grace that comes before. It does not of itself save, merely opening up the possibilities of salvation to humans and enabling people to respond to God. This response comes when we exercise justifying faith

a divine, supernatural ἐλεγχός of things not seen, not discoverable by our bodily senses, as being either past, future, or spiritual. Justifying faith implies, not only a divine ἐλεγχός, that God “was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself,” but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me. And the moment a penitent sinner believes this, God pardons and absolves him.

as we shall see later in this chapter.

49 Olson, Arminian Theology, 149.
50 Oden, John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity, 246; Olson, Arminian Theology, 27, 156.
52 Abraham, Wesley for Armchair Theologians, 56.
53 Abraham, Wesley for Armchair Theologians, 51-52; Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 76; Maddox, Responsible Grace, 83-84; Olson, Arminian Theology, 154.
55 Ibid., II.2, 387-88.
Jesus Christ - God of Grace Revealed

Wesley's Christology found its foundation in the love of God for, as we have seen, it was the love of God that was his starting point for understanding God’s interaction with humanity. This is no more evident than in God sending Jesus Christ to live and die and to atone for our sins.

This was central to Wesley’s theology and at one time, he labelled the atonement as “the most significant Christian doctrine of all.” It was his view that if Adam had not caused the problem of sin the incarnation of Christ would not have been necessary. However because he did, God, out of mercy and love, provided the means (Christ) by which humanity can be saved and can be brought into right relationship with God.

This brings us to the first of two doctrines relating to the atonement that Wesley preached. In doing so we note that, the question of which atonement theory (primarily “penal substitution” or “ransom”) Wesley was a proponent of has been discussed in detail by scholars such as Maddox, Olson and Thomas C. Oden. It is not my intention to develop this here other than to note that all agree that Wesley believed that all who are saved are saved by Christ's death on the cross and by that alone. That only through Christ can humanity be reconciled with God for the primary purpose of Christ's death was to atone for the sins of humanity.

Consequently, Wesley's sermons were full of images and metaphors designed to provide a picture of what Christ's sacrifice on the cross meant in relation to people’s relationship with God. It was a subject that Wesley appears to have never tired of describing as he gave the downtrodden poor and illiterate masses of his day the good news that Christ had paid the price for the sins of every human thereby allowing God to offer them freedom from condemnation.

Wesley was only able to preach this doctrine because he was firmly orthodox in his belief that Jesus Christ was at once fully human and full divine. He was therefore able to effortlessly use such Chalcedonian phrases as

56 Maddox, Responsible Grace, 96-97.
57 We remember that Wesley ascribes all fault for the fall to Adam alone.
58 Maddox, Responsible Grace, 96.
60 Olson, Arminian Theology, 232.
61 Oden, John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity, 187.
62 Olson, Arminian Theology, 223; Maddox, Responsible Grace, 94, 96.
Real God, as real man,
perfect, as God and as man,
the Son of God and the Son of Man\(^{64}\)

whilst at the same time emphasising Jesus’ divinity out of respect.\(^{65}\)

The second doctrine was that it is at once universal and conditional, as Charles L. Allen,\(^{66}\) Olson,\(^{67}\) and Maddox\(^{68}\) for instance comment. Wesley preached that everyone is a child of God and that God makes his grace available to all. God therefore makes the atonement available to all, that is, it is universal in its intent. However the blessings that it brings (justification, sanctification, and reconciliation with God) are only available to those who repent and believe (John 3:16) and hence the atonement is conditional.\(^{69}\)

**Holy Spirit – The Presence of the God of Grace**

We have so far seen that for Wesley the very essence of God’s nature and character was love and that out of that love God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to atone for the sins of all of humanity. We now turn to contemplate his pneumatology.

For Wesley the Holy Spirit is God’s agent of grace. In this role, the Holy Spirit conveys God’s prevenient grace, which is only possible because of the atonement, to human beings. Working in the hearts and minds of those lost in the deprivation that resulted from the fall, the Holy Spirit causes them to want to think about turning to God. The Holy Spirit then opens their hearts to the gospel and conveys God’s justifying and regenerating grace to the individual. In addition, the Holy Spirit enables those who hear the gospel to respond to God’s offer of a relationship with him.\(^{70}\)

Wesley was clear that this is not the end of the Holy Spirit’s work as an agent of grace. Rather he asserted that the doubt and uncertainty that assail the regenerated are driven out by the witness of the Holy Spirit given by God to enable them to build a “robust subjective confidence in the gospel.”\(^{71}\) The Holy Spirit witnesses to the spirit of believers that they are children of God for whom Jesus died and that their sins have

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\(^{64}\) Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity*, 177 as cited in Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 91.
\(^{66}\) Allen, “Foreword,” 18.
\(^{67}\) Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 232.
\(^{68}\) Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 109.
\(^{69}\) Allen, “Foreword,” 18-19; Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 232.
\(^{71}\) Abraham, *Wesley for Armchair Theologians*, 62.
been wiped clean\textsuperscript{72} thereby giving them the assurance that they are now in right relationship with God.\textsuperscript{73}

For Wesley then, the Holy Spirit mediates God’s sanctifying grace to the regenerated person. As the mediator of God’s sanctifying grace, the Holy Spirit cultivates both inward and outward holiness in the regenerated enabling them to do good works as God moves, through the Holy Spirit, in them.\textsuperscript{74}

In concluding our brief synopsis of Wesley’s pneumatology we can summarise it as follows - the presence and power of the Holy Spirit working in people enabling them to walk in God’s ways is the very definition of God’s grace.\textsuperscript{75}

\section*{Justification – God of Grace for Us}

So far, our consideration of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions has largely been related to the personhood that is the Trinity. With that work in view we now consider his beliefs in respect of the grace of God by first looking at his doctrine of justification. As we do we recognise that, having examined prevenient grace earlier in this chapter, this not a second grace of God for there is only one grace which operates in many ways. Rather it is a second “work” or “operation” of God.\textsuperscript{76}

Taking our cue from Wesley himself, we will attempt to outline his doctrine of justification by considering three questions.\textsuperscript{77} Firstly - What is justification? Secondly - Who can be justified? Thirdly – On what basis can they be justified?

As with Maddox, we turn to the words of Wesley himself to answer the first question of what is justification. First, we note Maddox’s comment, that in his Dictionary, Wesley defined justification with just one word – forgiveness.\textsuperscript{78}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{73} Allen, “Foreword,” 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{74} Olson, \textit{Arminian Theology}, 170.
  \item \textsuperscript{75} Collins, \textit{The Theology of John Wesley}, 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{76} Glen O’Brien, “your Thesis,” September 21, 2010. An email to the author.
  \item \textsuperscript{77} Wesley concludes his introduction to Sermon 5 \textit{Justification by Faith} with “I shall endeavor to show, First. What is the general ground of this whole doctrine of justification. Secondly. What justification is. Thirdly. Who they are that are justified. And, Fourthly. On what terms they are justified.” “Sermon 5, “Justification by Faith”,” in \textit{The Works of John Wesley, vol 5: First Series of Sermons (1-39)}, A \textit{Life of John Wesley}, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), para. 3, 53.
\end{itemize}
This is of course, not the only time that Wesley spoke about, nor the only time that he defined, justification throughout his lifetime. Accepting Maddox’s comment that Wesley did not expand much on this definition in his other works where he equated “justification with being pardoned and received into God’s favor” it is, nevertheless, incumbent on us to consider the subject in more depth. In doing so we see that one of the earliest occasions on which Wesley articulated his understanding as to the nature of justification was 1744 when he responded to the question - “What is it to be justified?” His response was that justification was receiving God’s favour, resulting from being pardoned by God, and thereby entering a state that will enable people to be saved provided they continue in that justified state.\(^{79}\)

Two years later\(^ {80}\) Wesley published Sermon 5 *Justification by Faith* in which he stated that scripture is clear that “justification is pardon, the forgiveness of sins.”\(^ {82}\) Then in 1765\(^ {83}\) he reiterated that justification is the pardon people receive from God wherein all their sins are forgiven adding that in being pardoned and forgiven people are also accepted by God.\(^ {84}\)

Having identified the nature of justification using Wesley’s writings we turn to consider what he said it was not. In doing so we will gain a more comprehensive picture of his thinking and so be better placed to answer the question – What is justification?

This reveals that for Wesley justification is not repentance nor is it sanctification. On the first – repentance,\(^ {85}\) he clearly stated that this has been given to the person before

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\(^{79}\) Ibid.


\(^{81}\) Wesley, *Works (Outler)*, vol 1, 182.

\(^{82}\) Wesley, “Sermon 5, “Justification by Faith”,” sec. II.5, 57.


\(^{85}\) Wesley defined repentance as “not one work alone, but is, as it were, a collection of many others: For in its compass the following works are comprehended: — (1.) Sorrow on account of sin: (2.) Humiliation under the hand of God: (3.) Hatred to sin: (4.) Confession of sin: (5.) Ardent supplication of the divine mercy: (6.) The love of God: (7.) Ceasing from sin: (8.) Firm purpose of new obedience: (9.) Restitution of ill-gotten goods: (10.) Forgiving our neighbor his transgressions against us: (11.) Works of beneficence, or almsgiving." “Sermon 134, “True Christianity Defended”,” in *Sermons on Several Occasions: Fifth Series. Consisting of eight discourses which were published from Mr. Wesley’s manuscripts after his death, but never designed by him for publication" in *The Works of John Wesley, vol 7: Second Series (87-108) Third Series of Sermons (109-126) Fourth Series of Sermons (127-133) Fifth Series of Sermons*
justification.\(^{86}\) Repentance for Wesley, notes Collins, flows not from being justified but “out of prevenient and convincing grace.” In emphasising repentance as occurring prior to justification, Wesley’s \textit{ordo salutis} differed from the Lutheran and Reformed positions.\(^{87}\)

It is also not sanctification in Wesley’s theology. Maddox comments that in his early period\(^{88}\) Wesley included sanctification (the recovery of full Christ-likeness) under his definition of justification but that by 1739 he had begun to differentiate between the two.\(^{89}\) His reasoning for doing so, in Maddox’s observation, was to ensure that no one was under any illusion that justification did not result in immediate Christ-likeness. In this way, he distanced himself from the doctrine of the English Moravians that he had previously accepted.\(^{90}\)

Wesley also drew a distinction between justification and regeneration (that act whereby God inwardly changes the person).\(^{91}\) Recognising this, Naglee identifies that justification was the first phase of Wesley’s soteriology, with regeneration being the second. With Naglee then, we can say that for Wesley justification marks the beginning of the Christian life and equally the beginning of the conversion experience.\(^{92}\)

There remains one aspect of Wesley’s definition of justification to consider. This being what he saw as the effects of justification. These he recorded as

the peace of God, a "peace that passeth all understanding," and a "rejoicing in hope of the glory of God" “with joy unspeakable and full of glory.”\(^{93}\)

What then is justification in the theology of John Wesley? It is the pardon people receive from God wherein all their sins are forgiven and they are accepted by God as a

\(^{86}\) Wesley, “Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith"," sec. IV.2, 61.
\(^{87}\) Collins, \textit{The Theology of John Wesley}, 156.
\(^{88}\) Maddox observes that “It has become increasingly common for studies of his [Wesley’s] theological convictions to distinguish between the “early Wesley” (1733-38), the “middle Wesley” (1738-65), and the late Wesley (1765-91).” \textit{Responsible Grace}, 20.
\(^{89}\) Ibid., 334 n. 58.
\(^{90}\) Ibid., 166.
result of which they enter a state that will enable them to be at once both saved (regenerated) and sanctified, provided they continue in that justified state.

As we turn to the question of who can be justified we are mindful of Wesley’s belief that everyone is a child of God and that God makes his grace available to all.\(^\text{94}\) Again, we turn to Sermon 5 *Justification by Faith* as our source of Wesley’s theology. He was clear here that only sinners need to be forgiven. Taking issue with those who said that a person must be sanctified before being justified he detailed the absurdity of that theology. He contended that if this is the case then God is forgiving sins that have already been forgiven. This is clearly illogical, in Wesley’s view, for God justifies the ungodly and the unholy, not the godly and holy.\(^\text{95}\)

Lest it be thought that Wesley is contradicting himself and now saying that God’s justifying grace is only made available to some, that is sinners, we remember the words of the Apostle Paul “for all have sinned ….”\(^\text{96}\) Accordingly, we can say that Wesley’s theology had it that all human beings can be justified but only once, for having been justified, they are holy in the eyes of God and therefore cannot be justified again.\(^\text{97}\)

**Justifying Faith**

If then all can be justified what is the basis of that justification? In order to answer this question we will attempt to unpack Wesley’s belief in, and understanding of, the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone.\(^\text{98}\)

Earlier we observed that for Wesley the love of God was the foundation for understanding God’s interaction with humanity\(^\text{99}\) and this is evident in his theology regarding justifying faith. He described justifying faith, or simply “faith” (these terms being synonymous in his thinking) with these words in his treatise “*A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion (Part 1)*”

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\(^{94}\) Allen, “Foreword,” 18.

\(^{95}\) Wesley, “Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith"," sec. III.2, 58.

\(^{96}\) Rom 3:23 - emphasis mine.


\(^{98}\) Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 212.

\(^{99}\) Ibid., 109.
Faith, in general, is a divine, supernatural ελεγχός of things not seen, not discoverable by our bodily senses, as being either past, future, or spiritual. Justifying faith implies, not only a divine ελεγχός, that God "was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself," but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me. And the moment a penitent sinner believes this, God pardons and absolves him.  

The astute reader will have noted that he used similar wording in describing his Aldersgate experience six years earlier:

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, 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.

He used these, or similar, words to describe faith on several occasions. For instance as early as 1733 (five years before his Aldersgate conversion experience) he preached:

... that faith, which is not only an unshaken assent to all that God hath revealed in Scripture, -- and in particular to those important truths, "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners;" "He bare our sins in his own body on the tree;" "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world;" -- but likewise the revelation of Christ in our hearts: a divine evidence or conviction of his love, his free, unmerited love to me a sinner; a sure confidence in his pardoning mercy, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost; a confidence, whereby every true believer is enabled to bear witness, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," that I have an "Advocate with the Father," and that "Jesus Christ the righteous" is my Lord, and "the propitiation for my sins," -- I know he hath "loved me, and given himself for me," -- He hath reconciled me, even me, to God; and I "have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins."

And in 1757 he wrote:

... But I hold, that a divine evidence or conviction that Christ loved me, and gave himself for me, is essential to, if not the very essence of, justifying faith.

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101 Ibid., sec. II.2, 387-88.


So then we see three fundamental elements form part of Wesley’s definition of faith—it is God given, it is an inward conviction and it is recognition of the forgiveness of sins made possible because Christ died to take away the sin of the world.

He repeatedly, as Collins, linked justification with the love of God for he was clear that even an individual’s belief that Christ loved them and died for them comes from God. It does not come from their humanity but comes from God’s divinity by God’s justifying grace. When the gift of faith offered by God is accepted the gift of salvation whereby we are able to continue to trust in Christ alone is also humanly accepted. Clearly then, for Wesley, just as a person cannot save themselves neither can they trust in Christ without God enabling them to do so. To put this another way—faith is first and foremost a gift of God but at the same time it is a human act.

Calling on the words of the Apostle Paul Wesley made it clear that for him faith is perceived rather than something seen concretely. It is more an inner sense than something that is known because of physical evidence or cognitive reasoning.

This is clear when he preached

Faith, in general, is defined by the Apostle, πραγματων ελεγχό ου βλεπομενων. An evidence, a divine evidence and conviction (the word means both) of things not seen; not visible, not perceivable either by sight, or by any other of the external senses. It implies both a supernatural evidence of God, and of the things of God; a kind of spiritual light exhibited to the soul, and a supernatural sight or perception thereof.

Here then we observe a tension in Wesley’s theology. On the one hand, our belief in Christ’s love and atonement for us comes from God and on the other it is we who must choose to believe. This appears to introduce the idea that we can do something from within ourselves in order to believe and yet without God’s prevenient grace we are depraved. Maddox solves this tension well when he defines what he calls “responsible grace”

I discerned in Wesley’s work an abiding concern to conserve the vital tension between two truths that he viewed as co-definitive of Christianity: without God’s grace, we cannot be saved; while without our (grace-empowered, but uncoerced) participation, God’s grace will not save. ... It focuses Wesley’s distinctive concern on the nature of God and God’s actions, rather than on humanity. It makes clear that God’s indispensable gift of gracious forgiveness and empowerment

106 Olson, Arminian Theology, 213.
107 Heb 11:1.
is fundamental, while capturing Wesley's characteristic qualification of such empowerment as enabling rather than overriding human responsibility.\(^\text{109}\)

There is a further tension evident in Wesley’s doctrine of justification as he also said that all are justified at birth. In a letter to John Mason, dated 21 November 1776, in refuting the Calvinistic notion that because of original sin all humans, including infants, are condemned, he wrote that

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\text{... no infant ever was, or ever will be, } \text{"sent to hell for the guilt\(^{110}\) of Adam’s sin;" seeing it is cancelled by the righteousness of Christ, as soon as they are sent into the world.}\(^\text{111}\)
\]

We are left then with the question of how to reconcile this view that all are justified at birth, with Wesley’s doctrines that firstly all are born in a deprived state and secondly that it is only the presence of God’s prevenient grace which draws us toward God in order that we can be justified “by grace alone through faith alone.”\(^\text{112}\) Recognising that we do not yet have sufficient information to attempt to reconcile this tension we acknowledge its existence and note that we will return to it later having considered how Wesley applied his doctrine of justification in respect of children.

**Regeneration and Sanctification – God of Grace in Us**

As the second phase of Wesley’s soteriology regeneration is also the beginning of sanctification. Both are therefore important doctrines to comprehend if we are to understand Wesley’s theology.

**Regeneration**

Whilst he saw justification and regeneration as distinctly different works of God, it is clear that, in his theology, Wesley recognised that they happen simultaneously.\(^\text{113}\) It is also apparent that like all aspects of the grace of God he saw both God’s justifying grace (whereby we are justified) and God’s regenerating grace (by which we are

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\(^{110}\) Collins reminds us that for Wesley justification takes away the guilt of sin. *The Theology of John Wesley*, 171.

\(^{111}\) Wesley, “Letter to Mr. John Mason (November 21, 1776),” 453.

\(^{112}\) Olson, *Arminian Theology*, 212.

regenerated) as similar in that both display God’s bountiful love and favour.  

Firstly, we recognise, as William J. Abraham, Collins, and Maddox that for Wesley regeneration is the beginning of sanctification. He was unwavering in his belief that it is the gateway to sanctification and took great care to ensure that it was seen as only a part, albeit an instantaneous part, and certainly not the whole of sanctification.

How then do we describe this gateway? Again, following the lead given by Maddox we note that Wesley provides us with a clear view of what he defined regeneration as

- being inwardly changed by the almighty operation of the Spirit of God; changed from sin to holiness; renewed in the image of Him that created us.

Wesley used phrases such as “born of God,” “the new birth,” “born from above,” “born of the Spirit,” “conversion” as well as “born again” to describe regeneration. With these phrases in mind he used the analogy of childbirth noting that just as a child is naturally born “in a moment, or at least in a very short time” so too the child born of God. That is the child born of God is also born in a moment, or at least in a short time.

It is the phrase “born of God” that is most helpful to us in understanding Wesley’s theology as regards the source of regeneration. With these words, he made it clear that this is an act of God. Just as in justification, it is God, not humanity, who forgives sins, so too in regeneration it is God who “makes sins holy.” As a result, having been justified and regenerated, people stand at the beginning of a life whereby with the empowerment of God’s grace they will be able to live a life of integrity.
Hence using Wesley’s gateway imagery, we can say that for Wesley when people reach to open the gate they are exercising justifying faith using their God-given ability to do so. At that moment, God opens the gate thereby justifying them and they stand on the threshold (regeneration) of starting along the new path of sanctification which we will now consider.

Sanctification

In doing so we pause to note the debate that surrounds his doctrine of entire sanctification. It is therefore important that we identify what Wesley said in relation to entire sanctification if we are to be able to discern whether he saw children as able to be entirely sanctified.

For Wesley just as faith is the only condition for justification so also it is “the only condition, of sanctification.” In this, Wesley followed the sola fide of the Reformation and succinctly underscored his view that just as we are justified by God’s grace, and we are regenerated by God’s grace, so too are we sanctified by God’s grace. As such, it is a gift from a God of love.

This gift of sanctification is the work of God and God alone – it is not something which we as humans can attain through works. It is a work of God produced in us at the same time that we are justified and regenerated. Having been born again (regenerated) we are also sanctified by virtue of being born of the Spirit at the same time. As Wesley said

8. But what is the perfect work of patience? Is it anything less than the "perfect love of God," constraining us to love every soul of man, "even as Christ loved us?" Is it not the whole of religion, the whole "mind which was also in Christ Jesus?" Is it not “the renewal of our soul in the image of God, after the likeness of him that created us?” And is not the fruit of this, the constant resignation of ourselves, body and spirit, to God; entirely giving up all we are, all we have, and all we love, as a holy sacrifice, acceptable unto God through the Son of his love? It seems this is “the perfect work of patience,” consequent upon the trial of our faith.

9. But how does this work differ from that gracious work which is wrought in every believer, when he first finds redemption in the blood of Jesus, even the remission of his sins? Many persons that are not only upright of heart, but that fear, nay, and love God, have not spoken warily upon this head, not according to the oracles of God. They have spoken of the work of sanctification, taking the word in its full sense, as if it were quite of another kind, as if it differed entirely from that which is wrought in justification. But this is a great and dangerous mistake, and has a natural tendency to make us undervalue that glorious work of God which was wrought in us when we were justified:

126 Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 14, 196.
Whereas in that moment when we are justified freely by his grace, when we are accepted through the beloved, we are born again, born from above, born of the Spirit. And there is as great a change wrought in our souls when we are born of the Spirit, as was wrought in our bodies when we are born of a woman. There is, in that hour, a general change from inward sinfulness, to inward holiness. The love of the creature is changed to the love of the Creator; the love of the world into the love of God. Earthly desires, the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life, are, in that instant, changed, by the mighty power of God, into heavenly desires. The whirlwind of our will is stopped in its mid-career, and sinks down into the will of God. Pride and haughtiness subside into lowliness of heart; as do anger, with all turbulent and unruly passions, into calmness, meekness, and gentleness. In a word, the earthly, sensual, devilish mind, gives place to “the mind that was in Christ Jesus.”

To put it another way God imparts to the believer the righteousness which enables them to begin the transformative process of being conformed to Jesus Christ. In so doing God removes the power of sin in the believer’s life, the guilt of sin having been removed when they were justified.

If this is sanctification then how is entire sanctification different? Firstly it is not a new kind of holiness according to Wesley. He is clear that from that moment when we are justified by God that love which is the fulfilment of the Gospel is ever present in us. It is this love which is Christian sanctification. It is this love which is true holiness.

But the degree of holiness varies according to our faith. Just as a baby is not physically mature, neither is the new Christian spiritually mature. As the Christian matures in their faith they also grow in holiness, love, humility, meekness and in the image of God. Then when the Christian is fully convinced of the sin inherent in their life by virtue of original sin God gifts them entire sanctification

... God, after he is thoroughly convinced of inbred sin, of the total corruption of his nature, to take it all away; to purify his heart and cleanse him from all unrighteousness; to fulfill that promise which he made first to his ancient people, and in them to the Israel of God in all ages: “I will circumcise thy heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul.”

Wesley concedes that the difference between sanctification and entire sanctification is difficult to understand and explains it by saying that until a person is sanctified the holiness in their life was mixed. For instance they were humble but sometimes they

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128 Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 171.


130 Ibid., para. 10, 489.
succumbed to pride, they were meek but also got angry, they loved God but sometimes put others first, they would generally follow God’s will for their lives but at times they would rebel and do their own thing.  

From the time they are entirely sanctified these lapses no longer occur. The believer

now loves God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength; so Jesus now reigns alone in his heart, the Lord of every motion there.  

There is one other aspect of Wesley’s doctrine of sanctification which we need to consider here. That is the question of whether it is an event or a process, a gift given by God instantaneously or gradually. After extensive research and investigation, involving personally interviewing hundreds of believers who were convinced they were entirely sanctified, Wesley concluded that “sanctification is commonly, if not always, an instantaneous work.” That said he also did not disagree that it could be a gradual work of God recognising that the experience of other believers led them to believe this to be how it was given to them.

This acceptance of two views as to how entire sanctification is given by God is typical of Wesley who would rework his theology to take into account the verified experience of believers provided he felt that the experience was of God. The question of how entire sanctification is given by God was also not as important for Wesley as he was more concerned with its nature.

The final point we note is that Wesley believed entire sanctification was possible because God says it is. He believed the Bible implicitly. Consequently, when God says, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” Wesley accepted this as a promise from God. He even went so far as to say that realising that humanity, because of its unbelief, would see this as impossible, God “stakes upon it all the power, truth, and faithfulness of him to whom all things are possible.”

He was also aware of Scripture when it says

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131 Ibid.
132 Ibid., para. 10, 490.
133 Ibid., para. 12, 491. Whilst Wesley does not use the phrase “entire sanctification” it is clear from the context in which he writes this phrase that it is “entire sanctification” that he is referring to.
134 Ibid., para. 11, 490.
135 Abraham, Wesley for Armchair Theologians, 83-84.
136 Matt 5:48.
Those who are born of God will not continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God.\textsuperscript{138}

For Wesley then, if God says people do not sin having been born again, then it must be so.\textsuperscript{139} This was the basis of his doctrine of entire sanctification that, put simply, says that by divine grace we can have victory over moral evil in our life on earth. To say that this is not possible was, for Wesley, to place limits on God's ability to eradicate sin in our earthly lives. Such a limitation on God was not acceptable to him.\textsuperscript{140}

In concluding our discussion of Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification, we remember that Wesley employed many terms to describe this state for what concerned him was not what it is called but the nature of it. Abraham helpfully lists the terms he used as including

- Christian perfection
- entire sanctification
- perfect love
- circumcision of the heart
- fulfilling the law of Christ
- holiness of heart and life
- union with God
- being filled with the Holy Spirit
- loving God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves, and the like.\textsuperscript{141}

He further notes that Wesley's favourite "was the biblical phrase: having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked."\textsuperscript{142} Whether or not it was his "favourite" expression is a matter of opinion, however we do know that he defined holiness with those words.\textsuperscript{143} To him they embodied the key requirements of living a truly Christian life, as he saw it, being to carry out the greatest commandments

- Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.
- Love your neighbour as yourself.\textsuperscript{144}

For Wesley then entire sanctification was holiness.

**Response to Grace**

In considering the response of the sanctified we pause to note that we should respond to the outpouring of God's grace in all its forms. Having been alerted to the presence of sin in our lives through God's prevenient grace the required response is to draw closer to God and determine how to overcome that sin. To God's justifying grace we are to

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\textsuperscript{138} 1 John 3:9.
\textsuperscript{139} Abraham, *Wesley for Armchair Theologians*, 84.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 84-85.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 86-87.
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{143} Wesley, "Sermon 120, "On the Wedding Garment",," para. 17, 317.
exercise justifying faith at which point we accept God’s gift of relationship and eternal life as we are

inwardly changed by the almighty operation of the Spirit of God; changed from sin to holiness; renewed in the image of Him that created us.  

In other words we receive God’s regenerating grace and in response open ourselves to receiving the sanctifying grace of God – our response to which we look at now.

Wesley’s doctrinal convictions regarding the response of those who are sanctified highlight a key area of importance to him as he sought to live out the call on his life to take the message of salvation to all who were prepared to listen. Throughout most of his life he applied himself conscientiously to the key task of articulating the twin themes of holiness and God’s grace. As a practical theologian, he also sought to see lives changed and diligently sought to shape the worldview and practice of believers in the world so that they could be equipped to live sanctified, holy lives.  

Whilst this is evident in each of his doctrinal convictions that we have considered in our brief survey of his theology so far it is in this area which focuses on the life of the sanctified believer that it becomes most obvious. In reflecting on the response of the sanctified believer we will discuss the changes Wesley expected would be evident in their life, how he expected the believer to affect the lives of others and the means of grace that he saw God as providing to enable these changes to happen. It is these means of grace which we will consider first.

**God’s Provision - the Means of Grace**

Wesley defined the means of grace as the ordinary channels through which God’s prevenient, justifying and sanctifying grace are conveyed to humanity. They are those external signs, words and actions that God has ordained, appointed, and provided for this purpose. Chief amongst these are prayer, searching the Scriptures (not only reading but also hearing and studying), receiving the Lord’s Supper, and fasting. These are what he called “works of piety” as they have a personal focus whereby the graces of God are given by God to people as individuals to enable them to grow in holiness.

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146 Maddox, Responsible Grace, 17; Felton, “Teaching Ministry,” 92.
Wesley distinguished these from “works of mercy” which are those means of grace where believers act as channels of God’s grace to others. These include acts of service such as feeding the hungry, quenching the thirst of the thirsty, providing hospitality to strangers, giving clothing to those who need it and visiting the sick and those in prison.\footnote{Wesley, “Sermon 98, “On Visiting the Sick”,‖ para. 2, 117-118. and Matt 25:35-36.}

Abraham reminds us that, whilst identifying certain activities and practices as means of grace, Wesley placed no limit on what means God chooses to use or on how God ordains they be used. Rather he acknowledged that God can choose to convey grace by any means. In doing so, Wesley was encouraging people to be alert to God’s grace operating in other ways at other times. To do otherwise would be to limit God - something Wesley would not do.\footnote{Wesley, “Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace”,‖ 200-201; as discussed in Abraham,\textit{ Wesley for Armchair Theologians}, 115-116.}

The Response of the Christian – Changed Lives

The response required of those who have accepted God’s justifying, regenerating and sanctifying grace, according to Wesley, is to practise all these means of grace as God has prescribed they be practised for it is God who has ordained them. When people do this, they come to know and love God and put themselves in a position to receive the grace of God. As they come to the means of grace people do so with complete trust that God will deliver to them what he has promised which is “grace upon grace.”\footnote{Abraham, \textit{Wesley for Armchair Theologians}, 114-15.}

Alongside this, Wesley maintained that people must also remember that God is sensitive to their needs and will meet them where they are. It is therefore imperative that they use all the means of grace, in a manner appropriate to the particular situation and need, remembering to be led by God in doing so. They should also remember that they are only able to do so because God provides the means of grace to them.\footnote{Wesley, “Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace"," 200; as discussed in Abraham, \textit{Wesley for Armchair Theologians}, 116-117.}

Nevertheless, Wesley was adamant they should be used, for in doing so people grow as Christians as they grow in faith in the experience of God’s grace and in the knowledge and glow of God’s love. This is no more evident than in his requirement that believers must practise the service means of grace.
Wesley held that whereas in practising the personal means of grace, that is, prayer, searching the Scriptures, receiving the Lord's Supper, and fasting, people grow in personal holiness it is in performing acts of service that they outwork their faith. Subscribing to the biblical paradigm that “faith without works is dead,” his view was that faith always expresses itself in works of love for if it does not it is not faith at all. For him the life of faith requires believers to obey the scriptural imperative to love God and their neighbours. As this is his definition of holiness, it is clear that for Wesley the practical outworking of faith is a requirement of the life of holiness, which is to say, being sanctified. In this way holiness of heart is outworked in holiness of life.

At the same time, Wesley’s doctrine of grace makes it clear that people cannot take any credit for loving others and doing works of service. They can only love others and do good works because God's grace works within them and the Holy Spirit gives them the freedom, and the ability, to do good. That is, they love God because he first loved them and they love others only because God enables them to do so, through the love of God, as shown in Christ, being placed in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. It is not difficult to see that this requires different behaviour to that exhibited by those who are not regenerated. Having been justified, regenerated and sanctified believers are now no longer controlled by the inherent sinful nature with which they were born and where they were in bondage to sin and unable to know, obey and love God. They no longer have a perverse nature which focuses on themselves and which shows itself in “self-will, pride, anger, revenge, and the love of the world.” Rather their nature has been transformed, as Heitzenrater, into one that is

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154 Abraham, Wesley for Armchair Theologians, 77, 136-37; Allen, “Foreword,” 19.
characterised by “resignation, lowliness, meekness, and the love of God,” which is to say one that shows itself in a life of holiness – in love of God and one’s neighbour.

Eschatology – Relationship Restored

We come then, to the final area of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions being that concerning eschatology. Wesley's eschatology, as would be expected given the scriptural orientation of his theology, was biblical in the strictest sense. As such, it embraced all things related to the end of the present order of creation and the world to come. It is therefore not surprising that included in his eschatology were a wide range of doctrines including revivalism, millennialism, the reign of God, death, intermediate states, immortality, resurrection, judgement, final justification, glorification, and the new creation.

Clearly, it is not possible to do justice to all of these doctrines here, nor is it necessary to do so, in the context of considering children in Wesley’s theology. For, what concerns us most here is whom Wesley saw as being able to spend eternity with God and how they get to do so. We are therefore, for instance, not concerned with the state they may exist in, when Jesus Christ will come again and inaugurate the reign of God, or where eternity with God might be spent. Rather, here, we will focus on Wesley’s doctrine of glorification only. This focus recognises that Wesley's main preoccupation was soteriological, which is to say, he saw his task as making known the biblical way to heaven and acknowledges his desire to offer the gift of salvation to all. It also recognises that his conviction was that the single purpose for which each, and every, human being is born is to prepare for eternity, ... [so] that [they] might know, and love, and enjoy, and serve [their] great Creator to all eternity.
Finally, this approach takes cognisance of the fact that glorification is part of Wesley’s *ordo salutis* which, as Collins reminds us, did not end with entire sanctification.  

In discussing the doctrine of glorification, it is helpful to understand the nature of the glorified state as Wesley perceived it. For that, we need only to turn to Sermon 64 *The New Creation* wherein he reminds us of the words of scripture that we will be God’s people and that God will dwell amongst us. It will be a time when holiness and happiness will combine in an unprecedented way. There will be no death or sorrow, no pain or sickness or grieving. However, as if this is not enough, said Wesley, it will be even better for there will be no more sin. Then, with typical sermonic fervour, he concluded his sermon by delivering the pièce de résistance:

And, to crown all, there will be a deep, an intimate, an uninterrupted union with God; a constant communion with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, through the Spirit; a continual enjoyment of the Three-One God, and of all the creatures in him!

As Collins comments, “Thus grace will triumph where sin once ruled; life will be victorious where death once held sway” and humanity will enjoy intimate communion with God. Such indeed is a glorious state to look forward to, and to be in, for all eternity. This is what it means to be glorified, as Wesley understood it.

So then, who can be glorified? In answering this question it is not so much a case for Wesley of who *can* be glorified as who *will* be glorified. He unequivocally stated that those who will be glorified are all those who have been justified at the final judgement. That is when God will separate the sheep from the goats, thereby identifying those who have enthusiastically continued to practise the service means of grace out of a holy heart. They will receive final justification, having first been entirely sanctified, and being both inwardly and outwardly holy. For Wesley then, those

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166 Rev 21:3 (KJV) as quoted in ibid., 18, 295.
167 Rev 21:4 (KJV) as quoted in ibid., 18, 296.
168 Ibid.
173 Ibid., sec. II.1, 387.
who will be glorified are those who have lived a truly Christian life having continually fulfilled both of the greatest commandments

    Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

    Love your neighbour as yourself.  

Grace, Holiness and Relationship

We have seen that Wesley’s theology began, ended and was permeated throughout with the grace of God, which emanates from the love of God. This was one of the key themes of Wesley’s theology with the other being holiness. For Wesley, it is only by receiving (from God) and practising holiness that people can ever reconnect with God and rekindle the relationship for which they were created.  

It is the love of God that is the source of the prevenient grace that is placed by God in every human being at birth thereby mitigating the state of total depravity that is the result of the fall. For Wesley, God’s prevenient grace is the grace that comes before. It awakens the first stirrings of good will toward God that people have and is therefore the initiating factor in their move towards God. Without it, they cannot move toward God nor can they take any steps toward faith.  

Wesley fully accepted the orthodox doctrine that God sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to atone for the sins of all people. He further taught that all can be justified by Christ’s atoning death and resurrection and by that alone but only some will receive its blessings. That is, whilst God’s intention was that the atonement was universal, only those who repent and believe in the Son of God can be justified, sanctified, and reconciled with God.  

Wesley’s theology was steadfastly Trinitarian in that he also recognised, and accepted, the role and presence of the third person of the Trinity, being the Holy Spirit. That role he identified as being the agent of grace conveying God’s prevenient, justifying, regenerating, sanctifying, and glorifying grace to the individual. The Holy

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177 Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 73-74.
178 Oden, John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity, 246; Olson, Arminian Theology, 27, 156.
Spirit, for Wesley, enables each person to hear and respond to the offer of relationship God makes.\textsuperscript{180}

Wesley firmly believed in the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone.\textsuperscript{181} That is, through God's grace, because of their faith people are justified and the guilt of sin is removed. At the same instant they are also regenerated, which is to say born again, showing them in a graphic and personal way the bountiful love and favour of God mediated to them by the grace of God.\textsuperscript{182}

Wesley's theology also had it that all who are regenerated are also initially sanctified, that is that at the moment of regeneration their sanctification begins. It too, as with justification, is a gift of God received by the regenerated individual by grace alone through faith alone.\textsuperscript{183} In sanctifying them, God removes the power of sin from their lives and they are enabled to begin the transformative process of being conformed to Jesus Christ. As a consequence, they begin to have "the mind that was in Christ," and to walk "as Christ walked."\textsuperscript{184} They are thereby enabled and empowered to live a truly Christian life, as Wesley saw it, being to carry out the greatest commandments

\begin{quote}
Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.

Love your neighbour as yourself.\textsuperscript{185}
\end{quote}

This is part of the response of the Christian for Wesley, whom he expects to practise the means of grace. These being both the personal means of grace (prayer, searching the Scriptures, receiving the Lord's Supper, and fasting) and the service means of grace (acts of compassion and benevolence, such as feeding the hungry, quenching the thirst of the thirsty, providing hospitality to strangers, giving clothing to those who need it and visiting the sick and those in prison).\textsuperscript{186} In so doing Wesley's theology was that the sanctified are showing their new nature being one which is characterised by "resignation, lowliness, meekness, and the love of God,"\textsuperscript{187} which is to say one which shows itself in love of God and their neighbour.

\textsuperscript{180} Olson, \textit{Arminian Theology}, 156; Abraham, \textit{Wesley for Armchair Theologians}, 62-63, 67.
\textsuperscript{181} Olson, \textit{Arminian Theology}, 212.
\textsuperscript{182} Wesley, "Sermon 5, "Justification by Faith"," sec. II.1, 56; Abraham, \textit{Wesley for Armchair Theologians}, 69-70; Collins, \textit{The Theology of John Wesley}, 196.
\textsuperscript{183} Wesley, "Sermon 43, "The Scripture Way of Salvation"," sec. III.1-3, 48-49.
\textsuperscript{184} Wesley, "Sermon 120, "On the Wedding Garment"," para. 17, 317.
\textsuperscript{187} Wesley, "A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children," para. 7, 476.
Sanctification was not, however, the end point of Wesley’s *ordo salutis*. Rather he believed that the sanctified will be glorified at the final judgement, and will live with God forever enjoying the right relationship with God for which they were created.

With this understanding of Wesley’s wider theological view, we are now in a position to focus in on it in more detail. Our intention in doing so is to answer the question of whether, and if so how, children were seen by him in his theology.
With these words Wesley concluded his journal entry of his examination of the faith of a thirteen-year-old girl. The clear import of this statement is that he expected that people must have, and maintain, their own personal faith by this age. Yet what about those we have defined as a child, that is those who have not yet attained the age of thirteen. We know, for instance, that he felt that by the age of ten he himself was no longer covered by the regeneration received at his baptism. Was this the age at which he believed children needed to be justified, regenerated and sanctified by virtue of their own personal faith or was it even younger? These are some of the questions we will consider as we dig deeper into his theology in order to answer the question of whether, and if so how, were children to be found in the theology of John Wesley.

As we did in the preceding chapter, we will consider each of the eight areas of his doctrinal convictions. In doing so we use the knowledge gained from our general consideration of his doctrines as the base from which to work. As we do, we also remember that child theology, taking its cue from Jesus, invites us to place children in the midst of the theological process and thereby seek to evaluate whether such theology is understandable through the lens of the child and children. This should lead to changes in theological views where that evaluation suggests this is necessary and appropriate.

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3 As Jesus did in Matt 18:2-3.
Once again, we seek to identify where children might be in Wesley’s theology by starting where he started - by searching within his doctrine of God. As we do so the question which underlies our discussion is - were children seen by Wesley in his doctrine of God, and if so how?

In answering this question we recall from the previous chapter that there were two foci in this doctrine as Wesley espoused it. The first focused on the innate attributes of God. Children are not God and therefore our initial conclusion could be that this aspect of the doctrine does not include them.

However we also know that Wesley’s theology was steadfastly Trinitarian and that he clearly saw a relationship between the three persons of the Trinity. That relational bond between Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be seen in the familial bond between mother, father and child. After all just as God the Father relates to God the Son and God the Holy Spirit and they in turn relate to God the Father and to each other, in a similar way the mother relates to the father and the child who in turn relate to her and to each other. In the ideal situation, being where the family unit is intact, this familial bond also reflects the love between the persons of the Trinity as each member of the family loves each other.

Even where, as is so often the case in this fallen world, the bond of love is not present in the family either because the parents no longer love each other or one or other (or both) parents no longer love the child or vice versa this relational bond is still present however. After all, the child still has both a mother and father and they in turn still have a child between them no matter what the state of the relationship is.

The second was how Wesley saw the innate attributes of God revealed in God’s interaction with humanity. It is here that we might also find children and therefore the question to be answered is did Wesley believe God extended his love and goodness to children as part of humanity? The answer to this question will become clear as we examine the other areas of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions beginning with his doctrine of prevenient grace.

Prevenient Grace – God of Grace Drawing Us

Our starting point in considering prevenient grace is Wesley’s doctrine of the fallen nature of humanity. In chapter two we saw that the default setting of the nature of all
humanity, for Wesley, is one where we are unable to know, obey, and love God. The question we seek to answer here is – in his view does this apply to children?

Wendy Hinrichs Sanders suggests that Wesley recognised the closeness of children to God but that the natural bias because of original sin meant that he saw them as “bent upon rejecting God's ways.” In so doing, she reminds us that he believed that all humans are born in a depraved state mitigated only by the presence of God’s prevenient grace.

Heitzenrater however suggests that Wesley did not present a consistent position on the innocence or otherwise of the unbaptised child. He suggests that Wesley's comments that a child is not innocent before God in his treatise *The Doctrine of Original Sin, According to Scripture, Reason, and Experience* show that Wesley believed there was evil in children. He then notes that Wesley records in his *Journal* for 15 June 1783 that he had never seen such innocence in children as he saw in the children of a family he visited in Holland. This latter comment, suggests Heitzenrater, is proof that Wesley also believed children to be innocent. Perhaps this is the case. However, it could also be that in referring to the children of the family in Holland Wesley’s use of the word “innocent” was not meant to convey that they were not depraved at birth but that they were now in right relationship with God. After all, he recorded that he estimated them to be “seven, six, five, and three years old,” all ages when Wesley believed children could be in right relationship with God, as our later investigations will show.

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6 By implication, the infant child given Wesley’s belief in, and expectation of, infant baptism.


10 In this work, I will refer to “depravity” rather than deprivation recognising that whilst Wesley believed that at no time is a human being totally depraved because prevenient grace is present in every human being at birth nevertheless he only occasionally used the term “deprivation” as noted by Olson. *Arminian Theology*, 149.

Of course, we do not know what was in Wesley's mind as he wrote and our
thoughts can only be conjecture. We note, however, that Heitzenrater also comments
that children provided examples of original sin for Wesley and that in his commentary
on Matt 18:4 his view that children are sinful and ignorant is evident, as it is in his
commentary on Luke 7:32.\(^\text{12}\)

Scholarly opinion therefore suggests that Wesley believed all children are born
depraved and that an unbaptised child is not innocent before God. Such views align
with what I believe is the most natural conclusion to be taken from Wesley's conviction
that all of humanity is born alienated from God. That is, as suggested by Collins,\(^\text{13}\)
Gayle Carlton Felton,\(^\text{14}\) and Towns,\(^\text{15}\) all children, being part of humanity, are born
alienated from God. We are therefore able to say that even the youngest infant is,
according to this doctrine, born depraved and in need of God's prevenient grace.

Given this, the question we need to consider is – is this as far as his concern for
children went? That is, did he merely acknowledge that children are, by definition, born
in a depraved state but focus his subsequent theological reflection on adults or did he
have something to say in respect of children?

To answer this we will consider what his *Journal* and sermons can tell us. From
these we note that Wesley clearly taught that every child is born with six "spiritual
diseases" being atheism, pride, love of the world, anger, deception and selfishness. All
these are traits that cause children to focus on themselves and not on God. All alienate
them from God. Indeed atheism as Wesley defined it is the inherent belief that the
individual is god for they have no natural idea or knowledge of the true God.\(^\text{16}\)

However Wesley was not content to just identify these thereby merely spelling out
what a depraved nature looks like in children (or for that matter in adults), but he
imparted his prescription for training children in the way they should live their lives.\(^\text{17}\)
Part of their education, for instance, must be to teach them that they are innately not
what they were designed to be. They are to be taught that they are fallen creatures and

\(^{12}\) Heitzenrater, "John Wesley and Children," 296, 297.

\(^{13}\) Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 67.

\(^{14}\) Gayle Carlton Felton, "John Wesley and the Teaching Ministry: Ramifications for Education in the

\(^{15}\) Elmer L. Towns, "John Wesley and Religious Education," *Religious Education* 65, no. 4 (July

Rapids: Baker, 2007), para. 5-11, 89-90.

are not the *imago Dei* in which they were first created. We may not agree with the violence of the imagery but Wesley made it clear that children are to be left in no doubt that when they act out of their natural instincts they are acting like the devil and not God. They must be taught, and must understand, that their natural traits, such as pride, passion, and revenge, are not godly traits. In other words, Wesley was not content merely to acknowledge that children are, by definition, born in a depraved state. Instead, his concern for their eternal destiny drove him to promulgate his thoughts on why they should, and how they could, move out of that state.

When combined with his rejection of the Reformed doctrine of total depravity and his position as an optimist of grace this required that he provide a factor to mitigate the natural state of humanity wherein each person is devoid of the grace of God. As we saw previously this factor was the presence of prevenient grace in every human being at birth. There is nothing more obvious, I suggest therefore, than that children were very much in view for Wesley in his doctrine of prevenient grace.

Wesley’s writings, for instance, show us that he believed God’s prevenient grace is active in children, not just at birth, but also as they grow. Firstly, we note Wesley’s views regarding conquering the will of the child. He insisted that as soon as reason dawned in the child’s life it was to be taught to submit its will to the will of its parents. Like his mother before him, he saw this as vital in order to prepare the child to submit to the will of God, which is to say, the work of prevenient grace. In a way Wesley saw parents as agents of God working in prevenient grace in the life of the child from at least the time when reason dawns.

Parents also act as agents of prevenient grace when they teach their children that all that they see and experience is only possible because God made and maintains the world. Likewise, when they train their children in the way they should go, and so correct the six spiritual diseases, parents are cooperating with God’s prevenient grace.

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18 Wesley, “Sermon 95, "On the Education of Children"," 18, 94.
21 I acknowledge Rev Richard Waugh, National Superintendent of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of New Zealand as my source for this idea. The title of Rev Waugh’s address at “Sending” at Carey Baptist College on 29 October 2009 was “Being a PG [Prevenient Grace] agent.”
Finally, we once again, have Wesley’s own words to enable us to conclude that he saw his doctrine of prevenient grace applying to children. In his journal entry for 30 July 1758, he records how God drew children to himself. As we have seen, this is the very work of prevenient grace – going before and enabling humans to move toward God.

**Jesus Christ - God of Grace Revealed**

If, as we saw in the previous chapter, all who are saved are saved by Christ's death on the cross and by that alone and the atonement is universal and conditional what does this mean for children? We will consider this question here as we seek to identify if and where children fit within Wesley’s Christology.

We begin our enquiry by considering what Wesley had to say about children and Christ in his various writings. In doing so we note there is only one entry in his *Journal* that specifically mentions children and Christ. This is that for 23 March 1764 when he recorded a series of conversations between one John B and his elder sister Jacky. It is clear from what Wesley documented of John B’s words that John B believed he belonged to Christ. Indeed, Wesley noted how he preferred to die and live with Christ rather than remain in the world. Wesley is in no doubt that John B is indeed in right relationship with Christ and should he die would go to live with God in eternity.

It is however in Sermon 96 *On the Education of Children* that we get a better picture of where Wesley saw children in his Christology. He concluded his sermon with the admonition to parents that they should continually encourage their children to act always in love just as Christ loved people so much that he made atonement for their sins. In doing so, Wesley noted that when children act in love in this way because God (who is also Christ) is love, God lives in them.

Recognising that our survey of Wesley’s *Journal* and sermons is limited, we turn to the work of scholars such as Estep, Willhauck, and Towns to provide us with

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further insights. Estep, for instance notes that Wesley saw children as “a focus of God’s plan for salvation.” He assesses this to mean that Wesley believed that just as adults need God’s redemptive work in Christ, so too do children. That for Wesley there was no difference between the needs of the child and the needs of the adult in this regard.29

This is partially true, however when placed in the context of Wesley’s concern for the continuance of the revival, it does not do justice to children in his Christology. Rather the salvation of children was a priority for him for on this rested the future of the then current revival as well as the salvation of future generations.30

Indeed he was so concerned for the future of the Methodist revival that he wrote four sermons with it in mind.31 Aware that the revival had already lasted longer than the thirty years that Luther posited a revival would normally last Wesley realised that it was on the matters he discussed in these sermons, and on the religious education of children in particular, that the future of the revival depended.32

For Wesley family religion, and in particular the religious education of children, was vital to ensure that the current revival, which had brought so many into a relationship with God, continued. Noting that the aim of religious education of children, as we shall discuss in more detail in the next chapter, was that they be empowered, and choose, to live a truly Christian life, it is clear that for Wesley children are indeed a focus of God’s plan for salvation. He saw no difference between the needs of the child and the needs of the adult in regards to their need of salvation; however, he did see a difference in terms of the relative priority. He saw that priority needed to be placed on the salvation of children.33 That is not to say that he suggested adults should be neglected rather that children had a greater focus in this regard in his soteriology.

The availability of Christ’s atonement to children is also commented upon by Rishell who suggests that Wesley held that Christ’s atonement meant that some children could

28 Towns, “John Wesley and Religious Education.”
29 Estep Jr., “Wesley's Formal Education Philosophy,” 47.
33 Ibid.
be saved without being regenerated, and that others, which is to say the remainder, needed to be regenerated. Willhauck comments that Rishell bases this assertion on what he believed to be Wesley’s definitive thoughts regarding children as contained in his 1776 letter to John Mason. As we saw in chapter two, it is in this letter that Wesley, in refuting the Calvinistic notion that because of original sin all humans, including infants, are condemned said that

... no infant was, or ever will be, "sent to hell for the guilt of Adam’s sin;" seeing it is cancelled by the righteousness of Christ, as soon as they are sent into the world.

It was Rishell’s contention that Wesley came to this belief because he encountered children who had been regenerated who were so young that there was no other explanation than that they had been divinely regenerated without any human interaction. That may be the case, however this statement only partially supports Rishell’s view for Wesley did not say only some children can be saved without being regenerated but that all children are saved at birth. This, I suggest, is the import of his view that no infant is destined for hell. If they are not “sent to hell” there is only one place they can be destined for when they die which is eternity with God. Based on our understanding of Wesley’s doctrines of justification and regeneration this can only mean that they are justified and regenerated (regeneration being simultaneous with justification in Wesley’s theology). That is to say they are saved.

That Wesley’s theology had it that all children are saved at birth becomes clearer when we look closely at the phraseology he used. For instance, he did not say “some” infants but chose to use the word “no” which clearly means he included all infants. He further emphasised this point by speaking of both those infants already born and those yet to be born, again leaving no room for any infant not to be included in his statement.

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38 Collins reminds us that for Wesley justification takes away the guilt of sin. The Theology of John Wesley, 171.
What is also of significance from this comment, is that here we may have an example of Wesley undertaking something analogous to child theology. That is, if Rishell’s view that Wesley came to this doctrine that all are justified at birth as a result of his experiences with children is correct, then he allowed the experiences of children to inform his theology. Albeit that in doing so he introduced the tension between this doctrine that all are justified at birth and his doctrines related to the depravity of humanity and the work of prevenient grace, as we saw earlier. We are still not in a position to attempt to resolve this tension at this point so will continue to be aware of it as we consider his other doctrinal convictions.

Murrell’s comment, also as cited by Willhauck, that the reason that Wesley required his preachers to teach children in matters of religion was that children were being regenerated by divine intervention is also plausible. This being because it allows for the probability that when Wesley talked of young children having this experience he was referring to children who had at least attained the age of reason and were accordingly able to speak of their experience. Of particular note is Murrell’s comment that Wesley required his preachers to instruct children in order that their lives might continue to imitate Christ. Therefore, in Murrell’s view and it appears Willhauck’s given the tenor of her writing, Wesley believed that the atonement of Christ is available to children.40

We began our consideration of this area of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions by asking the question - if all who are saved are saved by Christ’s death on the cross and by that alone and the atonement is universal and conditional what does this mean for children? Our survey of Wesley’s Journal and some sermons, along with the views of other scholars, enables us to conclude that for Wesley children were clearly in view in his Christology.

For instance, Wesley undoubtedly believed children could be reconciled with God through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and through that alone. He also believed that God makes the atonement available to all children, just as God does to adults. Most importantly, seeing them as a priority for salvation, he also saw them as a focus in his Christology.

In leaving the subject of children in Wesley’s Christology we allow Towns the final comment. It is he who, I suggest, best summarises where Wesley saw children in his Christology when he comments that Wesley believed children have the right to come to

Christ and should be brought to him by their parents in order to be “ingrafted into him.”

**Holy Spirit – The Presence of the God of Grace**

When considering children in relation to Wesley’s doctrine of the fallen nature of humanity we recognised that he believed all children are born in a depraved state mitigated only by the presence of God’s prevenient grace. In addition, the possibility that children are justified and, therefore regenerated at birth, as we have just noted, requires the presence of God’s justifying and regenerating grace. This being the case we must also conclude that for Wesley the Holy Spirit is at work in children at birth. That is to say, if the Holy Spirit is the mediator of God’s prevenient, justifying, and regenerating, grace then *ipso facto* the Holy Spirit is present at the birth of the child as God’s agent of grace.

However, where is the Holy Spirit in childhood? Can the Holy Spirit be working as God’s agent of grace in the child as it grows or is the Holy Spirit dormant, so to speak, until the child becomes an adult? We will consider this question as we seek to identify if and where children fit within Wesley’s pneumatology.

It is clear from entries in his *Journal* that Wesley was convinced that the Holy Spirit could be, and was, active in childhood. As early as 1737 Wesley recorded how the Holy Spirit was at work in children when he commented on how the Holy Spirit moved “upon the minds of many of the children.” This was not an idle observation for Wesley clearly stated that he saw the Spirit moving.42

It is however, his entry for 28 June 1746 that most reveals the place of children in his pneumatology. He recorded with joy the case of a three-year-old boy who was open to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Wesley observed how this boy could discern the voice of the Spirit and having done so willingly obeyed it. It is clear from the way that this entry is written that Wesley was convinced that this was real. This is particularly clear as he went on to use it as an example to teach that God, through the Holy Spirit, can and does teach children at an early age.43

41 Towns, “John Wesley and Religious Education,” 322.
Wesley’s Sermon 96 *On Obedience to Parents* provides further evidence of his belief that the Holy Spirit can be at work in children. Here he noted how the Holy Spirit’s presence is unlikely to be felt until the child obeys its parents. The clear implication is that he believed the Holy Spirit can be felt by, and hence be at work in, the child under the right circumstances.

We also note the concerns of Tranter that Wesley expected children as young as six to deal with matters of such momentous import as the fall, redemption, hell and the Holy Spirit. It is not necessary for me to delve into Tranter’s thinking or my own reasoning as to why I believe Tranter to be misguided in his criticism, in this thesis, but I note that the Holy Spirit was included in the list. The only conclusion to be drawn, from Wesley’s inclusion of the Spirit in a list of subjects that he required six year olds to understand is, I suggest, that he believed that the Spirit could work in the child even at that age.

Taken together then, Wesley’s journal entries and comments, his sermonic rhetoric and his requirement that six year olds understand about the Holy Spirit lead us to but one conclusion - that children are clearly in evidence in how Wesley saw the outworking of his pneumatology.

**Justification – God of Grace for Us**

Heitzenrater and Willhauck agree that there is clear evidence from Wesley’s writings that he believed children could have a justifying faith and therefore could be justified. After all, as we have seen, faith is God given and nowhere does Wesley say that there is a minimum age that God decides it is appropriate to give a person faith. This is not surprising given that to say that such an age existed would limit God, something that we have also seen Wesley would not do.

Heitzenrater further notes however that the question of when "a child could have a bona fide conversion experience" was one that Wesley sought to answer for

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Unfortunately, neither Heitzenrater nor Willhauck, provide us with any thoughts on whether Wesley found an answer to his question. Neither do they provide us with their thoughts on the question of at what age Wesley believed a child could be justified.

This is an important question, for justification is the only phase of the conversion experience in which the child potentially plays any part, regeneration being an act of God alone.\textsuperscript{50} It may also help us solve the aforementioned doctrinal tension.

Beginning once again with Wesley’s journal entries we read his account of a four-year-old girl whom he described as having died “in the full assurance of faith.”\textsuperscript{51} Did he believe this four-year-old girl was justified? Before answering this question, we note his definition of the phrase “full assurance of faith”

... The assurance in question is no other than the full assurance of faith: Therefore it cannot be a distinct thing from faith; but only so high a degree of faith as excludes all doubt and fear. ... \textsuperscript{52}

With this in mind, I believe it is clear that Wesley fully accepted that here was one who had a saving faith at four years of age.

Then there is the case of a girl less than eight years old who, in response to Wesley’s brusque questioning of her, responded that she knew God told her that her sins were forgiven. Forgiveness is the very definition of justification as we have noted. It is clear that Wesley accepted this as being true for he did not say that he found her faith deficient or in any way express doubts as to the authenticity of it.\textsuperscript{53}

The lack of any expression suggesting he doubted the authenticity of the child’s faith is particularly telling for elsewhere in his Journal he clearly stated where he

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\textsuperscript{49} Heitzenrater, “John Wesley and Children,” 294.

\textsuperscript{50} Wesley, “The Doctrine of Original Sin: Part II,” 308.


\textsuperscript{53} Stephen Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley: A Biography} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 10.
disagreed with someone. For instance, in his entry for 23 March 1746, just three days later, he recorded how having preached at Birmingham he afterwards spoke with an Antinomian teacher. He recorded the conversation in some detail and in a somewhat sarcastic tone prefacing it with a comment to the effect that he recorded it in detail so that everyone would know how wrong Antinomianism is. The phrasing he employed in recording this conversation leaves one in no doubt that Wesley did not agree with the Antinomian teacher.\textsuperscript{54}

However his phrasing as regards the conversation with the eight-year-old girl the previous Thursday has none of the sarcasm, nor does it have an introduction suggesting he disagreed with the state of her faith (as there is in the entry detailing his conversation with the Antinomian teacher). Rather his wording is straightforward and he introduced his entry by noting how glad he was that he was able to talk with her.\textsuperscript{55} We may, I suggest, therefore conclude that Wesley not only accepted the child's faith as genuine but that he saw nothing unusual in a child of eight having such genuine faith.

Dated just three months later, Wesley's entry for 28 June 1746 speaks to his belief that a child of three years old could be in right relationship with God. This is clear from the emphasis with which Wesley recorded the age of the boy and his recording of how the boy “died in peace.”\textsuperscript{56} His use of this latter phrase is particularly telling in this regard for it is I believe safe to assume that he is referring, not to a mere sense of inner contentment, but to the peace that passes understanding which, as we have noted, he saw as one of the fruits of justification.\textsuperscript{57}

Wesley's recording of his conversation with a Mr Beresford dated 8 April 1755 is very enlightening as to the age at which he believed a child could be justified. Here he speaks of the life and recent death of Mr Beresford's two-and-a-half-year-old daughter. We will discuss how her behaviour reflected that which Wesley expected of one who was pursuing a Christian life when we consider the sanctified, holy life. For now, we note that his use of the phrase that she died “without any struggle” is suggestive of one


\textsuperscript{56} John Wesley, “Journal Entry for June 28, 1746,” 16.

who died “rejoicing in hope of the glory of God” another of the effects of justification as enumerated by Wesley.\(^{58}\)

With that in mind, we can also assume that she died confident in the knowledge that she was going to be with God, which is to say possessing the peace that passes understanding. In addition, Wesley’s recording of her death with these words is sufficient evidence to conclude that he believed she was in right relationship with God. When we add to this that he recorded her exact age, we can also conclude, as Estep does,\(^{59}\) that Wesley believed that a child aged two years six months can be justified.

Wesley’s entry for 29 April 1759 is particularly interesting. Here he recorded the conversation he had with a thirteen-year-old girl in which he examined her on the state of her faith. The very nature of his question wherein he asked, “O why was she not then taken to Paradise?” is unimpeachable evidence that he believed she had been justified for only the justified can be in right relationship with God and therefore be taken to “Paradise.” This makes his concluding statement, “I fear she has now no religion at all!” even more puzzling.\(^{60}\)

Was he really saying that because she had not yet died she was no longer in right relationship with God? The answer is not significant for our discussion; however, what is pertinent here is the implication of his expressing that fear. That implication being, that not only did he accept that a thirteen-year-old can be justified and so have a saving faith but he believed that a child must be justified and have its own saving faith by the age of thirteen.

It is in Sermon 5 *Justification by Faith*\(^{61}\) that Wesley expressed most clearly his views regarding the justification of children when he said

> Justifying faith implies, not only a divine evidence or conviction that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself;” but a sure trust and confidence that Christ died for my sins, that he loved me, and gave himself for me. And at what time soever a sinner thus believes, be it in early childhood, in the strength of his years, or when he is old and hoary-haired, God

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\(^{60}\) Wesley, “Journal Entry for April 29, 1759,” 477-78.

\(^{61}\) Outler advises that “This written sermon was first published in 1746, and it stands as the earliest full summary of Wesley’s soteriology in the basic form in which it will continue.” John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, vol 1: Sermons I: 1-33*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial Edition. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 182.
justifieth that ungodly one: God, for the sake of his Son, pardoneth and absolveth him, who had in him, till then, no good thing.  

Therefore there is little room to doubt that Wesley saw his doctrine of justification applying to children. With Heitzenrater, Willhauck, Estep, and Prince, we see clear evidence that Wesley believed young children could have a justifying faith and could as a result be justified, by God. We are also able to say that for Wesley the latest a child must have its own justifying faith is at thirteen years of age.

As to the youngest age Wesley believed that children can be justified we have to accept that this was at birth, given his letter to Mr Mason. In reaching this conclusion, we note that we are still unable to resolve the tension between this and Wesley’s doctrines that firstly, all are born in a depraved state of humanity and secondly, that it is only the presence of God’s prevenient grace which mitigates this depraved state and draws people toward God so that “by grace alone through faith alone” they can be justified.

Regeneration and Sanctification – God of Grace in Us

Given that Wesley believed children could be justified the question which now concerns us is whether, and if so how, he saw children in his doctrines of regeneration and sanctification? Did he, for instance, believe they can be regenerated and sanctified? If so at what age did he believe this was possible? Finally, did he believe they even need to be?

In beginning to attempt to answer these questions, we note the entry in his Journal wherein Wesley commented on the faith of a boy of about eight years of age. He wrote of how before this boy died he had convinced his younger sister of sin, as a result of which this young girl had been justified as we noted earlier. It is however Wesley’s

67 Wesley, “Letter to Mr. John Mason (November 21, 1776),” 453.
68 Olson, Arminian Theology, 212.
69 From here, in using sanctification and sanctified I mean that state wherein people (primarily children) have been the recipients of God’s sanctifying grace at the time of their regeneration. That is it does not include, or imply, the state of being “entirely sanctified” unless specifically noted.
comments that he died "as an hundred years old, in the full triumph of faith" that are of most interest in our discussion here.\textsuperscript{70}

The import of Wesley's words that he died "as an hundred years old" is, I suggest, clear. This boy had a mature faith that, in Wesley's opinion, was as real and as strong as that of any adult who had walked with God for many years. However, more importantly Wesley records that he died "in the full triumph of faith."\textsuperscript{71} Does this signify that in Wesley's opinion this eight-year-old boy was regenerated and sanctified?

Before answering this question we note that Wesley used the phrase "in the full triumph of faith" on fourteen other occasions in his writings over the period 1742 to 1789, that is to say a period covering most of his life.\textsuperscript{72} Most of these instances relate to the death of adults\textsuperscript{73} and in five cases, the deceased are Methodist preachers.\textsuperscript{74}

These latter entries are of particular note for determining what Wesley meant by the phrase, for his requirements of those who thought they were called to be Methodist preachers were exacting. They had to prove that they were justified, that the love of

\textsuperscript{70} Wesley, "Journal Entry for March 20, 1746," 10.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} The exceptions are those recorded for 11 August 1752 which speaks of the daughter (of an undisclosed age, suggesting she was likely a child) of a Mr M—. Wesley, "Journal Entry for August 11, 1752," 273. and that for 6 November 1785 where Wesley records the woman as being 18 years of age. "Journal Entry for November 6, 1785," 323.

\textsuperscript{74} Wesley, "Journal Entry for May 18, 1777," 99; "Notices Concerning Deceased Preachers," 512, 513, 514, 515.
God dwelt within them, that is to say, they were regenerated, and that their speech was holy and without fault, which is to say they were sanctified.  

Therefore, when Wesley describes this eight-year-old boy as having died “in the full triumph of faith” it is clear that in his view this boy was sanctified. It is also apparent that by virtue of the nature of sanctification Wesley also believed the boy had been regenerated.

On another occasion (26 April 1750), Wesley recorded how a number of children whom he examined were “rejoicing in God.” His use of this phrase indicates that he believed these children to be sanctified, as a brief discussion of his use of the phrase elsewhere will show.

Wesley used the phrase “rejoicing in God,” or something similar 103 times in his writings. Of those occasions when he used this phrase he appended the words “their Savior” sixty one times indicating that the person had been saved by Christ. Even where he did not append these words, it is clear from his writing that he believed the person or persons about whom he was speaking had been justified, regenerated, and sanctified. For instance in his journal entry for 30 September 1770 he observed that the eight children and three adult servants were not only “rejoicing in God” but were also “walking worthy of the Gospel.” On another occasion, he wrote of those who were “rejoicing in God their Savior” that they were also in constant communion with God the Father and God the Son.

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75 John 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. 50, 324.
77 For example, “rejoice in God,” “rejoiced in God.”
79 Or similar wording e.g. “our Savior,” “your Savior,” “my Savior,” “her Savior” etc.
Another of Wesley’s journal entries that demonstrates that he believed a child could be regenerated is that of 29 May 1750 relating to four-year-old Richard Hutchinson. What makes it clear that Wesley believed he was justified, regenerated and sanctified are Wesley’s observations that the boy prayed and that his earnest desire was to die in order to go home to his Father.  

On the first, that is the matter of prayer, the significance of Wesley highlighting this is only clear when we realise that Wesley advocated that only those who had been regenerated should pray. This is apparent from his introduction to his treatise *Prayers for Children* in which he exhorted the children to “forsake sin” (which is to say, exercise justifying faith), and to try to do what God had shown them they should (that is, to say grow in sanctification). By so doing, Wesley suggested that their prayers will be effective and he reminded them that, “The prayers of the wicked [that is the unregenerated] are an abomination unto the Lord.”

With respect to the second of Wesley’s observations, Richard’s intense desire to die in order to go home to his Father, we note that he (Richard) clearly distinguished between his earthly and his heavenly homes. We read of how when reminded he is at home, and presumably in the company of his father (although Wesley does not mention his father directly) he is in no doubt that his true home is in heaven with his true Father, being God. Such an orientation toward the things of God is only possible in one who is sanctified, which is to say having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked.

We cannot conclude our survey of Wesley’s Journal in respect of the question of whether he applied his doctrines of regeneration and sanctification to children without considering the entries where he wrote of preaching to children. Whilst he did not specify what he preached on in each instance, his response to the question “Do we preach as we did at first?” provides an indication of what it is likely to have been. His

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83 John Wesley, “Prayers for Children - Preface,” in *The Works of John Wesley, vol 11: Thoughts, Addresses, Prayers and Letters*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 259. N.B. the phrase Wesley uses as being of God viz. “The prayers of the wicked are an abomination unto the Lord” I assume is a paraphrase of Prov 15:8 (KJV) “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight.”


response to that question was that preaching was to speak of, and encourage, justification, regeneration, and sanctification.\textsuperscript{86} This being the case it is self-evident that as Wesley felt it appropriate to preach to children and encouraged others to do the same\textsuperscript{87} he also believed children could be both regenerated and sanctified.

Turning then to his sermons we note that there is one clear instance in them that confirms that he believed children could be regenerated. This is when he spoke, in Sermon 96 \textit{On Obedience to Parents}, to children about honouring their parents as ordained by God.\textsuperscript{88} He made it clear that he was addressing Christian, that is to say regenerated, children for he said he was speaking to those who “fear God, and have a desire to please him” telling those who do not that he had no interest in them at that time as regards the issue he was talking about.\textsuperscript{89}

This survey of Wesley’s writings, when combined with that undertaken earlier in order to answer the question of whether he believed children could be justified\textsuperscript{90} provides sufficient evidence to conclude that he believed children could be both regenerated and sanctified. We can also see that he believed that this was possible from at least the age of four however is that the youngest age at which Wesley believed a child could be regenerated and sanctified.

To answer this and our other question of whether he believed children need to be regenerated requires that we consider his theology on baptism. Recognising however that it is not possible to cover all aspects of Wesley’s theology in detail in a thesis of this magnitude,\textsuperscript{91} we will rely on recent scholarship to provide us with relevant insights on his baptismal theology.


\textsuperscript{88} Exod 20:12.

\textsuperscript{89} Wesley, “Sermon 96, "On Obedience to Parents"," sec. II.1, 106-7.

\textsuperscript{90} We can include Wesley’s entries relating to children being justified given that regeneration happens simultaneously with justification and is the beginning of sanctification as we have previously noted.

\textsuperscript{91} For instance, Susan Willhauck devotes a significant portion of her 1992 PhD dissertation (“View of Children.”) to Wesley’s baptismal theology.
As we saw earlier Rishell contended that Wesley believed some children could be saved without being regenerated, and that others, which is to say the remainder, needed to be regenerated. I have shown that Rishell’s view is only partially supported by the quote from Wesley on which he bases his conclusion. However, there is the possibility that Rishell’s view nonetheless accurately represented Wesley’s theology given that Wesley believed he had sinned away his own regeneration at about the age of ten.

As Towns reminds us, Wesley felt that until approximately the age of ten the cleansing power of the regeneration that God had bestowed upon him at his baptism was still in effect. This suggests that Wesley believed that from the age of ten he, as a child, needed to be regenerated in order to be saved. Accordingly, it follows that Wesley believed some children, at least, needed to be regenerated in order to be saved. Putting it plainly - whilst all could be saved not all would be saved without being regenerated.

With this in mind Towns posits that Wesley’s position was that it is baptism that justifies and regenerates the child. That it is through baptism, as an outward sign, that children can attain spiritual life, as they are unable to repent or believe. He therefore argues that for Wesley it is only through baptism that infants can be saved from the state of original sin in which they were born.

Towns’ views, whilst they take account of Wesley’s statement about his own need for regeneration, come primarily from Wesley’s Treatise on Baptism. Based on this tract Towns proposes that Wesley saw baptism as a vehicle for the infusion of God’s grace such that the child’s eternal salvation is assured if, having been baptised, they die “before they commit actual sin.” It therefore follows, in Towns’ judgement, that Wesley believed that those who sinned after their baptism must be born again (regenerated) if they are to be saved for in sinning they had denied the saving grace

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92 Ibid., 167.
93 Wesley, “Letter to Mr. John Mason (November 21, 1776),” 453.
94 Wesley, “Journal Entry for May 24, 1738,” para. 1, 98.
95 References to baptism are to infant baptism, which is to say the baptism of children younger than the age of reason.
(justification) which they had received at their baptism. Towns therefore concludes, “that Wesley felt conversion is universally necessary for children as well as adults”\(^{100}\) which is a conclusion well supported by Wesley’s thinking as embodied in *Treatise on Baptism*.

Naglee, as cited by Willhauck, takes a similar position to Towns in that he agrees that for Wesley regeneration occurred in baptism.\(^{101}\) Where he differs from Towns is in his contention that Wesley did not believe in the need for conversion (regeneration). He posits the view that Wesley saw no need for regeneration post baptism, as children became Christians through, nurture, education, and participation in the rites of the Church of England.\(^{102}\)

As with Rishell, Naglee’s position is only partially supported by Wesley’s writings however, in that as we have seen Wesley believed that those who died without committing actual sin did not need post baptismal regeneration. For all others he believed regeneration was essential for them to enter into right relationship with God.

Willhauck’s own view is a fourth conception of Wesley’s views. She contends that Wesley did not believe that baptism was sufficient for salvation in and of itself. Rather he saw it as an initial, albeit essential, step towards salvation. She argues that Wesley encouraged subsequent regeneration believing it was both possible and preferable for all children. Whereas Naglee’s stance is that Wesley believed that once a person had been baptised they did not need to be regenerated, Willhauck’s is that he believed that everyone, whether baptised or not, needed to be subsequently regenerated.\(^{103}\)

Here again we see partial support in Wesley’s writings on regeneration for the view of a contemporary scholar. In this case, Willhauck’s view is supported in that Wesley believed post baptismal regeneration was essential for those who committed sin after baptism. However, he also believed that baptism was sufficient for salvation, for those who died without committing actual sin. Given this, we must also assume that Wesley believed a child was regenerated in baptism, contra Willhauck.

Felton, speaking in the context of Wesley and religious education, advocates that Wesley believed children were justified and regenerated in baptism, as Towns. She further asserts that the baptised child is nurtured within the church, as Naglee.

\(^{100}\) Towns, “John Wesley and Religious Education,” 322.
\(^{101}\) Willhauck, “View of Children,” 173.
\(^{102}\) Ibid., 171.
\(^{103}\) Ibid., 164, 173.
However, contra Naglee, but in agreement with all other commentators whose views we have discussed so far, she believed the baptised child needed to be subsequently regenerated.\(^{104}\) Her phraseology leaves room for the possibility that some, which is to say those who die before committing actual sin, need not be regenerated post baptism in order to be saved.\(^{105}\)

Collins correctly concludes that Wesley believed all children were justified at birth by virtue of the atonement of Christ, citing as his evidence, Wesley’s statement to this effect in his 1776 letter to John Mason,\(^{106}\) which we considered earlier. He also notes that in his “sacramental” view of regeneration Wesley believed that regeneration and baptism occur at the same time. This, suggests Collins, is the import of Wesley’s statement that until approximately the age of ten he had not sinned away the regeneration that God had bestowed upon him at his baptism. It is, he concludes, confirmed by Wesley’s later comments that the Church of England’s practice of baptising infants was premised on the belief that in baptism the infant was also born again\(^{107}\) and that he held to this doctrine throughout his life. Finally, Collins also speaks of Wesley’s insistence that baptism did not guarantee that a person was a Christian later in life and that those who deliberately sinned after they had been baptised, needed to believe, repent and be regenerated if they were to be in right relationship with God.\(^{108}\)

Regeneration for Wesley was clearly not a gift that God bestowed upon people only once. Rather it is one which a person could receive often until God gifts them entire sanctification. And whilst he does not say so directly the material Collins has used from Wesley’s writings in order to solve the apparent tension between Wesley’s “sacramental” and “evangelical” views of regeneration,\(^{109}\) supports the view that Wesley believed that regeneration can be received at any number of points in a

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\(^{104}\) With the exception of Naglee all other commentators discussed to this point assert that Wesley believed that some, or all, baptised children need to be regenerated post baptism.

\(^{105}\) Felton, “Teaching Ministry,” 95.

\(^{106}\) Wesley, “Letter to Mr. John Mason (November 21, 1776),” 453.


\(^{109}\) Collins notes that in his “sacramental” view of regeneration Wesley held to the Church of England theology that regeneration and baptism occurred at the same time, particularly in infant baptism, whilst in his “evangelical” view he differentiated between the two insisting that baptism was an external sign of the inward work of regeneration. Collins, The Theology of John Wesley, 262-65.
person’s spiritual journey such as at birth, at the time of their baptism and after their baptism.\textsuperscript{110}

Whilst each of the positions canvassed here presents a slightly different position on what Wesley believed about the timing of regeneration all agree that Wesley believed that regeneration was essential to living a life in right relationship with God. Between them they also provide us with sufficient of Wesley’s thinking, as bequeathed to us in his writings, to enable us to develop a view on what Wesley believed regarding when regeneration occurs.

So it is that I take a position that is very similar to that of Collins. That position is that, given his view that regeneration occurs simultaneously with justification (as we noted earlier), Wesley believed a person is initially regenerated and sanctified at birth. He also believed that regeneration and sanctification took place simultaneously with infant baptism and that this was sufficient to save those who subsequently die without committing actual sin. Finally, it is my view that it was his contention that those who commit actual sin post their baptism, lose the cleansing power of the regeneration that God had bestowed upon them at their baptism and must be regenerated again if they are to be in right relationship with God.\textsuperscript{111}

In taking this position, I recognise that it still leaves unanswered the question of how to reconcile Wesley’s belief that all children are justified at birth with firstly, his doctrine of the depraved state of humanity at birth and secondly, his doctrine of the presence of God’s prevenient grace which mitigates this depraved state and draws people toward God in order that they can be justified “by grace alone through faith alone.”\textsuperscript{112} Indeed it highlights the further tension that if a child is justified and, by virtue of the simultaneity of justification and regeneration, regenerated at birth how does this accord with Wesley’s doctrine of baptismal regeneration?

I confess I do not have an answer to either of these two tensions and perhaps it is best not to attempt to determine an answer. Rather I will ascribe these apparent

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{111} Subsequent to this thesis being marked, and prior to its publication, Glen O’Brien suggested, in an email to the author dated 21 September 2010, that it may be best to “think in terms of ‘acceptance’ rather than ‘justification.’ God accepts a child in its innocence, before it has committed wilful sin, because the prevenient grace of God cancels out the guilt of inherited sin.” This is an interesting perspective and may be valid however it raises the question of whether it is true to say that the cancelling of inherited sin is an action of prevenient grace. I am not in a position to be able to answer that question within the parameters of this thesis and so have chosen to accept the tension between Wesley’s doctrines which arises from accepting that children can be justified at birth and continue dialogue in other forums on this.

\textsuperscript{112} Olson, \textit{Arminian Theology}, 212.
contradictions to Wesley’s conjunctive theological style such that it is not a case of either/or but both/and.\textsuperscript{113}

Despite these apparent contradictions, it is clear that Wesley saw children as being subject to the beliefs and practices embodied in his doctrines of regeneration and sanctification. As we have seen, his writings show that he believed that both regeneration and sanctification could, and need to, be childhood experiences.\textsuperscript{114} They also show that he believed that the youngest age a child is regenerated and sanctified is at birth.

This leaves us with the question of whether Wesley believed a child could be entirely sanctified. As evidence that he did I offer his belief that God promises that those who are sanctified (which as we have seen includes children) can be perfect,\textsuperscript{115} and his assertion that to say this is not possible was to place limits on God’s ability to eradicate sin in our earthly lives.\textsuperscript{116}

Response to Grace

As we saw in the previous chapter it is the daily practising of the means of grace that is the required response of Christians. Identifying, therefore, whether Wesley allowed that children could practise the means of grace will help us determine whether he saw his doctrine of sanctified, holy living applying to children. In doing so we recall that for Wesley sanctification is given by God at the same time that he gives the gift of regeneration and that from that time on a believer lives a life characterised by degrees of holiness which vary according to their faith until God gifts them with entire sanctification.\textsuperscript{117}

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\textsuperscript{113} Collins states “[Wesley’s] style of theological reflection, sophisticated and well nuanced in many respects, has resulted in the designation that Wesley was a “conjunctive” theologian. Thus, the most able and consistent interpretations of Wesley’s theology have realized that it is ever a matter of “both/and” and not “either/or.”” \textit{The Theology of John Wesley}, 4.
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\textsuperscript{116} Abraham, \textit{Wesley for Armchair Theologians}, 84-85.
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Once again we find his *Journal* is a valuable source of information to help us answer this question.

There is, for instance, the case of four children whom he allowed to take communion after they had undergone several weeks of daily instruction and after they had earnestly requested permission to do so.\(^{118}\) On another occasion, he allowed eight children from Kingswood School, who had been justified during a revival that had broken out at the school over the previous few days, to partake at the Lord’s Table having had little, if any, instruction.\(^{119}\) In this latter instance, Wesley also recorded how the children continued to live sanctified, holy lives, as he did in the case of John Woolley.\(^{120}\)

His entry (21 February 1742) relating to John Woolley records how he had been expelled from Kingswood School for bad behaviour and how his behaviour had changed markedly after he heard Wesley preach on disobeying parents.\(^{121}\) Wesley observed in considerable detail how John Woolley prayed earnestly and often, how he wrestled with God, how he developed an incredible love for others, how he respected his parents to the point where he went out of his way to help them, how he did good works whenever he could, how he evangelised those he met, how he worried about his father’s lack of faith and how he admonished his elder sister to always put God first.\(^{122}\)

Perhaps, though, the most telling aspect of Wesley’s account relates to the circumstances that prompted him to write. He began the account by explaining that he was officiating at John Woolley’s funeral. Later he explained that the boy had asked that Wesley take the service and that the text for his sermon be the words of King David

> Before I was humbled I went astray, but now I keep your word.\(^{123}\)

It is significant that Wesley included this request in his account for it shows that he believed that not only was John Woolley living a sanctified (holy and changed) life but

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121 Exactly which sermon Wesley was preaching we do not know but it will not have been Sermon 96 “On Obedience to Parents” as that first appeared in 1784. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley, vol 3: Sermons III: 71 - 114*, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial Edition. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), 361.
123 Ps 119:67 KJV as recorded in Ibid., 361.
that he also recognised that he was practising both the personal, and the service, means of grace.  

Two others of whom Wesley wrote in a similar vein are John Lane and Elizabeth Walcam. We read how nine or ten-year-old John Lane walked continually in the light of, and daily praised, God. Elizabeth we read had, from the age of six behaved in a way that convinced Wesley that she too lived a sanctified, holy life until she died at sixteen. 

Our final example from Wesley’s Journal is that of two-and-a-half-year-old Miss Beresford. He was clearly impressed by this young girl’s life noting she was, “such a child as is scarce heard of in a century.” Wesley recorded in some detail how her behaviour was in accordance with that which he espoused as appropriate for one living a sanctified, holy, and changed life. 

Finally in our examination of Wesley’s writings we note that in Sermon 96 On Obedience to Parents he spoke of his expectation that Christian children will willingly keep the fifth commandment “Honour your father and your mother.” Such willingness can only come from love of others, which as we have seen, is a sign of a sanctified, holy life. 

It appears therefore that Wesley believed that children can live a sanctified, holy life from as young as two-and-a-half being the youngest age which he recorded a child as doing so. However, is this the case? A brief survey of recent scholarship will show that there are differing opinions as to what these, and other examples in Wesley’s Journal, reveal about his thinking as regards this doctrine and in particular about the age from which he thought it possible for children to live holy, sanctified lives.

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124 Ibid., 358-59. 
128 Exod 20:12. 
In doing so we see that Rishell, Towns, Tranter, Henry Rack, and Heitzenrater are amongst those who agree that Wesley believed children could live a sanctified, holy life. Both Rishell and Towns, for instance, use the phrase “deeply religious life” in describing the type of life they believed Wesley felt children were capable of.

Noting that Wesley recorded many instances of children living holy, sanctified lives, Towns suggests that nevertheless we cannot be sure of the age at which Wesley expected to see children living such lives. Others, notably Rishell, Prince, Tranter, and Rack, whilst also not identifying a particular age, contend that Wesley believed very young children were capable of living a sanctified, holy life.

Tranter comes closest to identifying an age when he comments that “the younger and more pious sounding” a child’s experience was, the greater was Wesley’s delight in recording it. It is in this context that Tranter cites a number of examples from Wesley’s Journal including that of a three-year-old boy calling his sister to pray with him, suggesting that Tranter accepts that Wesley believed a child as young as three could live a sanctified, holy life.

Prince’s comment is also of note. He implies that Wesley accepted that children could live such a life at a young age because he had seen some who did, which we have seen from the journal entries we have canvassed. He further maintains that despite these direct experiences Wesley saw it as unusual but did what he could to encourage and nurture it from as early an age as possible.

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136 Ibid., 323-24.
139 Tranter, “John Wesley and Education,” 31.
141 Tranter, “John Wesley and Education,” 31.
As I have noted, both Tranter and Heitzenrater accept that Wesley believed that even very young children could live a sanctified, holy life. That said, their views are worthy of further scrutiny as they raise issues around Wesley’s motivation and thinking in this area of his theology.

Tranter, for instance, suggests that the examples Wesley recorded in his *Journal of children living sanctified, holy lives*, are examples of his desire “to dispense with childhood”\(^\text{144}\) and of how he did not understand the nature of childhood, as does Prince also.\(^\text{145}\) In doing so Tranter cites Wesley’s forbidding of children playing\(^\text{146}\) as evidence for his view.\(^\text{147}\) The inference that we can take from this, I believe, is that Tranter considers that Wesley saw children as little adults,\(^\text{148}\) as also do Jerry Lee Mercer and Duane A. Ewers.\(^\text{149}\)

We will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter where from our consideration of Wesley’s educational views we will have more information on which to decide whether Tranter, Mercer and Ewers are correct. For now we note that their view that Wesley saw children as little adults is not supported by his views regarding how and when the Holy Spirit works. For instance, there is the comment he made in the context of writing of the faith of the three-year-old son of Mrs Nowens:

> When the Holy Ghost teaches, is there any delay in learning? \(^\text{150}\)

The fact that he chose to record this sentiment in the context of talking about a three-year-old suggests that he believed that the Spirit can, and does, work with very young children.

\(^{144}\) Tranter, “John Wesley and Education,” 31.


\(^{146}\) Wesley did not allow play believing that playing as a child resulted in playing as an adult “A Short Account of the School in Kingswood, near Bristol [Published in the Year 1768],” in *The Works of John Wesley, vol 13: Letters*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), para. 5, 285. and therefore, Green suggests, he could not understand why play and recreation were necessary or desirable. *John Wesley* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964), 80.

\(^{147}\) Tranter, “John Wesley and Education,” 30-31.

\(^{148}\) When children are viewed as “little adults,” as they have been in some periods of history, they are not seen as important in their own right. They are expected to accept that life is hard so no attempt is made to soften the hardships of life for children. They are required to accept adult responsibilities at an early age with one result being that poor children work the same long hours as their parents for instance. In addition, children’s clothes do not differ from those of their parents. Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, *Children in English Society vol 2: From the Eighteenth Century to the Children Act 1948* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 348.


young children. It also implies that Wesley saw a distinction between children and adults. It is therefore, I believe, a more plausible interpretation of his views regarding children to say that he was making it clear that he believed that children can have as mature a faith as, or indeed even a more mature faith than, any adult and that they can do so at a very young age.

This view that Wesley made a distinction between children and adults is similar to that expressed by Heitzenrater. His position is that not only did Wesley believe that children should not be seen as adults but that he also recognised that some children had a greater capacity to love and to learn than did some adults. This became clear to Wesley from his observations regarding the role that children played in revivals. As we have already noted, Heitzenrater remarks how Wesley recorded that children often played a crucial role in revivals with God beginning his work in children, from where it spread to adults. It is also Heitzenrater’s position that Wesley’s central concern was that children, as with adults, “know and love God.” Wesley was convinced, in Heitzenrater’s opinion, that such would enable children to live holy, sanctified lives.  

This survey of recent scholarship has confirmed that our conclusion from considering Wesley’s Journal that he believed children could live holy, sanctified lives is in accord with the general scholastic consensus. It has however shed only minimal light on the question of the age from which he believed this was possible with only Tranter providing some guidance here when he accepts that Wesley believed a child as young as three could live such a life. Recognising that Tranter’s view is supported by the example of the three-year-old son of Mrs Nowens  

I suggest that it is not the youngest age which Wesley accepted that a child was living this type of life. Rather it is my view that Wesley’s Journal supports the view that he believed that a child as young as two-and-a-half could live a sanctified, holy life and here I refer to his entry in respect of Miss Beresford.  

Before closing our work on this doctrine however there is still the question of the impact of Wesley’s belief that a child is initially sanctified at birth, and later at baptism, on this age question. Given that, as we have seen, Wesley believed that only those who commit actual sin post their baptism need to be regenerated again, it is logical to assume that he believed the same of the unbaptised child given his belief that a child is saved at birth. That is, only the unbaptised child who commits actual sin needs to be

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regenerated again. This would also imply that the unbaptised child who does not commit actual sin is living a sanctified life for they have done nothing to lose the regeneration and sanctification they received. There is therefore no other feasible conclusion, I suggest, than that Wesley believed that it is possible for a child to live a sanctified, holy life from birth. Whilst this may be difficult to conceive of, once again we remember that Wesley did not presume to place any limit on what God could do.

Eschatology – Relationship Restored

Given the conclusion that Wesley believed a child could be entirely sanctified we can presume that he also believed a child could be glorified. That said we will consider some of the direct evidence available from his writings in order to confirm our thinking.

Many of Wesley’s journal entries where he relates the faith of children provide us with such evidence. There is, for instance the entry for 25 November 1746 wherein he recorded burying twelve-year-old George Adams. It is clear that Wesley believed George was glorified, as he recorded that God had called him to himself. For given that only the glorified can be in the presence of God, if he is calling George to himself, it must be with the intention of glorifying him.

We recall, also, Wesley’s entry for 29 May 1750 wherein he recorded the life and death of four-year-old Richard Hutchinson. As we have noted Wesley believed him to be sanctified. What makes it clear that he also believed he will be glorified is not only his recording of the boy’s earnest desire to die in order to go home to his Father, but also how Wesley recorded the boy’s ability to distinguish between his earthly and his heavenly homes. The boy was in no doubt that his true home is in heaven with his true Father, being God, and Wesley was in no doubt of this either for he did not say otherwise.

There is also the case of John B whom Wesley recorded as saying

I am quite happy when I am saying my prayers; and when I think on God, I can almost see into heaven.

This, in itself, is sufficient evidence that Wesley believed that here was a child, aged about ten, who would be glorified. However, this becomes even clearer when we read Wesley’s extended discourse on John’s desire to get to heaven and never leave

154 Wesley, “Journal Entry for November 25, 1746,” 34.
156 Wesley, “Journal Entry for March 23, 1764,” 162.
it, on his conception of what heaven will be like, and on his intense desire to take those
he leaves behind to heaven, even after his own death. Particularly telling is Wesley’s
recording of his words

   And as well as I love you all, when I am once got to heaven, I would not come to you again for ten
   thousand worlds.\footnote{Wesley, “Journal Entry for April 8, 1755,” 325-26.}

   With these words, it is clear Wesley recognised that this child understood the
   nature of the glorified state in which he would be, that is, one that would be better than

One final instance is worthy of consideration, given my use of it as proving that
Wesley believed a child as young as two-and-a-half years of age could be justified,
regenerated and sanctified. I refer, of course, to the case of Miss Beresford.\footnote{Wesley, “Journal Entry for April 8, 1755,” 325-26.} Whilst
Wesley recorded her as knowing God, the phraseology he employed does not as
obviously point to him believing she would be glorified, as does the terminology he
used in respect of the others I have cited. That said he did say that she died peacefully,
and peace, as we have seen is one of the effects of justification. Not only that, but also
one would expect that a person who knew they were going to be with God would die
peacefully “rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.”\footnote{Wesley, “Journal Entry for April 8, 1755,” 325-26.} In addition, he recorded how her
behaviour was in line with that which he espoused as appropriate for one living a
sanctified, holy, and changed life.\footnote{Wesley, “Journal Entry for September 16, 1744,” 472.} All the indications, therefore, point to the fact that
Wesley believed that she was glorified.

These are but four of the examples which are to be found in Wesley’s \textit{Journal} that
prove that he believed children could be glorified. In closing our consideration of his
\textit{Journal} in this respect we note that other phrases he used which indicated he accepted
that the children he wrote about would be glorified include

   going to God in the full assurance of faith\footnote{Wesley, “Journal Entry for April 8, 1755,” 325-26.}

   and

   for if I die, I shall go to him.\footnote{Wesley, “Journal Entry for March 20, 1746,” 10.}
The question, which has underlain our discussion here, has been whether Wesley believed children can be glorified. There is little doubt that he believed they can be, for he recorded on a number of occasions where dying children knew they were going to be with God. Wesley accepted their beliefs without question, for once again, we find no evidence, in either what he wrote or in the words he used, that indicate otherwise. As we have seen earlier if Wesley had had any doubts he would have recorded them.

Children in Evidence

Having considered the eight areas of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions it is clear that children were evident in each of them. By virtue of being part of humanity, children are in evidence in his doctrine of God for God chooses to interact with them thereby extending them his love and goodness. In addition the familial bond of which the child is a part reflects the love between the persons of the Trinity as each member of the family loves each other. Similarly, we saw that children can be justified by Christ’s atoning death and resurrection and by that alone and so Wesley had them in mind in his Christology also.

In considering Wesley’s pneumatology we saw that children were a key part of this doctrine for he recognised that the Holy Spirit moves on, and works in, children at a very young age. Indeed Wesley used children to emphasise his view that God chooses where and when to move through the Holy Spirit, so it is not up to any human being to question whether the Holy Spirit moves in very young children.

Moving to justification, regeneration, and sanctification, which we will consider together for we recognise the simultaneity and inter-connectedness of the three in Wesley’s theology, we found that there is clear evidence that Wesley believed children are justified, regenerated, and sanctified at birth. We also concluded that he believed that those children who subsequently commit actual sin can, and need to, be regenerated as children. Given Wesley’s belief in the faithfulness and unlimited ability of God to choose what to do, as well as where and when to move in the hearts and minds of people, we accepted that he believed children can be entirely sanctified. Similarly, we recognised that Wesley believed children are able to practise all the means of grace, both personal and service, and can live sanctified, holy lives.

Finally, in our consideration of the eight areas of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions we identified that Wesley believed children can be glorified and that it was part of his
mission in life to do all that he could to ensure that they were given every opportunity to be so.

In the next chapter, we will look more closely at Wesley's endeavours in the area of education in order to understand if, and how, he applied his theological views regarding children, as we have identified them here, practically.
LESSONS FROM JOHN WESLEY

It must be mended, or ended; for no school is better than the present school.¹

From the previous chapter we know that children were evident in each of the eight areas of Wesley's doctrinal convictions and that we can say with confidence that children are in view in his theology. We also recognised in a previous chapter that Wesley was a practical theologian, who sought to see lives changed and who diligently sought to shape the worldview and practice of believers in the world so that they could be equipped to live sanctified, holy lives.²

In this chapter, we will examine Wesley's endeavours in the area of education with the aim of identifying whether those endeavours were informed by how he saw children in his theology. This is important if we are to take the next step, as we do in the final chapter of this thesis, of identifying lessons from him which may be useful for those called to children's ministry in the twenty-first century. After all if Wesley did not apply his theological understandings regarding children in his own practical ministry is it realistic of us to attempt to do so in the twenty-first century?

In exploring his views on education and his implementation of those views we will consider the questions of who, what, why, where and how children should be taught. In answer to each question Wesley's views will be detailed before consideration is given to how, as a practical theologian, he implemented those views. In approaching his implementation of his views we do so recognising that, as in all areas of doctrine and practice, one way he did this was through his sermons, treatises, letters and the like. With respect to parents he could do little else but exhort them to follow his views as he expounded on them through his preaching, and in his recording of them in his printed

documents. However, he also found ways whereby he could ensure his views were carried out in practice. It is these latter activities which our discussions regarding implementation will focus on.

In turning to investigate Wesley's endeavours in the area of education we are mindful that his primary interest was in the spirituality of the people and in particular the state of their eternal souls. He was therefore concerned that the then current revival, which had brought so many into a right relationship with God, should continue. For that to happen Wesley was adamant that the religious education of children had to be given due attention.

As we focus on this area of his ministry we find that despite what most people might think Wesley exerted considerable influence on education in the eighteenth century and beyond and that he had an abiding interest. This is indeed one of his legacies. He was an educator, a voice for educational reform and was totally committed to ensuring that children were provided with at least the opportunity of a basic education. 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 could be achieved. So committed, as we shall see, that as evidenced by the above quote he would rather close a school down that was not educating children as he wished than have it continue to provide what he saw as a poor quality education.

Wesley's interest in the education of others can be traced to the 1720's when he began to financially support the Grey Coat School in Oxford. In the 1730's he, along with some friends, supported the work of William Morgan who had started a school for orphans and poor children also in Oxford. He also actively encouraged William Delamotte in his efforts to teach the children in Georgia (USA), once again providing

5 Green, for instance, notes that Kingswood school was possibly his greatest interest throughout his life. John Wesley (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964), 135.
6 Whilst our discussion here focuses on the child we note that for Wesley education was a lifelong process and so what applies to the child also applies to the adult.
financial support. His interest in education is also evident in 1739 when the first purpose built Methodist meeting hall was built on land he obtained in the Horse Fair, Bristol. In addition to providing an indoor preaching place for the local societies it served as a school for local children.  

**Teach Why?**

Education for Wesley had only one aim - the restoration of people to the state of perfection they enjoyed when God created human beings as part of creation. It should train them in wisdom and holiness with God's help and in so doing instil in them the principles of Christianity, training them to become "rational, scriptural Christians." Having achieved this they would be living holy lives fulfilling the two greatest commandments:

- Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind
- Love your neighbour as yourself.

on their path to glorification.

Before unpacking what this meant for Wesley we note the congruence of his view with that of his mother for whom the goal of education was to regain the correct knowledge of God which had been lost at the fall.

In order to begin to determine what this meant for Wesley, we turn to Sermon 95 *On the Education of Children*. It is in this sermon that he cited the pedagogy of the classical Greek teachers, specifically Socrates, Pythagoras and Plato. His reason for doing so was to point out that their teaching also aimed to restore the perfection of humanity and in so doing draw a comparison between them as pagans and with Christianity which points to the real truth. In this way he was able to reinforce his view that Christian schools should not only teach the basics of the faith but should also educate children in order that they can live truly Christian lives. After all, asked Wesley, if the pagan Greeks knew enough to teach their children with this aim in mind, surely

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Christians who know the real truth should realise the importance of doing so also. If nothing else teaching children in the ways of Christianity should have a greater priority than anything else that is taught, in his opinion.\(^\text{14}\)

For Wesley this was the responsibility of parents as well as school teachers. We will see later the requirements he placed on parents as to what to teach and how, but for now we note that he firmly held to the belief that parents in particular should follow the scriptural command to

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\text{Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.}\(^\text{15}\)
\]

It is in Sermon 94 \textit{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 it. It is in this sermon that 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 in matters of religion. These children either never enter into a personal relationship with Christ or if they do they backslide. Consequently their behaviour is sinful.\(^\text{16}\)

Contrasting this situation with those parents who effectively teach their children in the knowledge and ways of God he conceded that there are some children who will still rebel but made the point that it is a relatively small number. In this manner Wesley outlined his position that how the children are educated and trained by their parents from a young age very largely determines how they will turn out and how they will behave. Most importantly it also largely determines the state of the children’s relationship with God and hence of their immortal soul. We can therefore say that for Wesley a key part of starting children on the right path was teaching them everything they need to know in order to be saved and thereby empowering them to love God and their neighbour.\(^\text{17}\) This is to say, that when parents follow the scriptural imperative stated in Prov 22:6 they start the child on the journey which culminates in the aim of education being achieved.

Later in this sermon Wesley spoke to those Christian parents who, having done all they could to start their children effectively on the right path, now faced the difficult task

\(^{15}\) Prov 22:6.
\(^{17}\) Ibid.
of deciding which school to send them to. Wesley’s advice to them reflected his belief that the aim of education is the restoration of each person to the state of perfection they enjoyed when God created human beings as part of creation. As was often his way he posed a question which he proceeded to answer. In this case his answer began with the response most parents will give when asked why they want to send their children to school. That response reflected that most parents of his day, and I suggest more so in the twenty-first century, would consider their child’s school education successful if they were equipped for life in the world of humanity. When our children leave school we expect they will know what they want to do for a job, will have good social skills and will know enough to make their way in adulthood in the world of humanity. Wesley recognised this was important but at the same time urged parents to remember that their child needs to be prepared for the world to come also, that is, eternity in right relationship with God.\(^\text{18}\)

Clearly then Wesley saw the aim of education as being to equip the child to live in both this world and the next.\(^\text{19}\) This, after all, is the perfection that humanity enjoyed when God first created it – loving God and loving one’s neighbour.

Wesley first sought to find existing schools which measured up to his standards. Finding none he founded Kingswood School in 1748.\(^\text{20}\) Here, as in the other schools he set up, religious education was paramount, with Kingswood School, for instance, being one which “was to be a model Christian institution, which would not disgrace the apostolic age.”\(^\text{21}\) How he went about attempting to ensure that this was the case will become evident as we consider his other views on education. For now we note that the educational principles he instituted here would later be employed in the Foundery day school in London, in a school at Woodhouse-Grove and in schools established by his followers and compatriots at Leytonstone, Treveca and High Wycombe.\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{18}\) Ibid., para. 13, 83.
\(^{19}\) Ibid.
\(^{20}\) Wesley, “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” no. 8, 292; John Wesley, “Journal Entry for June 24, 1748,” in The Works of John Wesley, vol 2: Journals from December 2, 1745 to May 5, 1760, ed. Thomas Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 101. Note – while Wesley clearly states that he founded Kingswood School this is an issue of discussion amongst scholars as to whether this was in fact the case or whether he merely took over a school founded by George Whitefield.
\(^{22}\) Heitzenrater, “John Wesley and Children,” 287.
Green asserts that Kingswood school was possibly Wesley’s greatest interest throughout his life. The evidence provided by his *Works* supports this view. He seems to have visited the school on at least most occasions when he was in the area, oftentimes preaching to the children. His last journal entry, wherein he records having visited the school, is of particular significance as it was for 11 September 1789 and was less than eighteen months before his death. In addition, not only does the school appear frequently in his journal entries but he also wrote three substantive discourses where it was the subject matter.

On a number of occasions Wesley recorded his observations regarding the state of the school. From these we see that at times Wesley was happy with the school and how it was being operated whilst at other times he was not. It is an unfortunate fact that he was often disappointed over the course of his lifetime as, despite his best

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efforts, his rules, curriculum, and methodology were not always implemented as he would have liked.\footnote{Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 123.} A particularly enlightening example of this is one he recorded in 1783. Here he lamented that the school was not operating in accordance with his original design. That is to say, rather than being a model and nursery for Christianity and holiness it was no better than any of the schools which he had criticised before building the school. It was at the conclusion of this discourse that he made it plain that he would rather close the school than have it continue as it was\footnote{Wesley, “Remarks on Kingswood School,” 301-2.} saying

It must be mended, or ended; for no school is better than the present school.\footnote{Ibid., 302.}

However, by September 1789 it appears that whatever actions were taken, as a result of his 1783 concerns, had succeeded. Here, in his last journal entry regarding the school he expressed his pleasure that it was operating “just as I wish.”\footnote{Wesley, “Journal Entry for September 11, 1789,” 471.}

Wesley, it appears, was content with what he had instituted but how do others view his educational endeavours? John Gross and Towns are two who view his educational contribution favourably. Gross holds that the educational programs Wesley instituted in Kingswood departed from those traditionally found in English schools. This he sees as an indication of how advanced Wesley’s educational philosophy was for its day. He goes so far as to suggest that Wesley was the only eighteenth century English leader of any note who was really interested in educating children no matter what their socio-economic class and the only important leader who implemented any practical ways of doing so. Towns, writing in 1970, suggested Wesley’s conduct of educational opportunities and his stimulation of the intellectual life of people in England in his century made him “a pioneer of popular education.”\footnote{John Gross, \textit{John Wesley: Christian Educator} (Nashville: Board of Education The Methodist Church, 1954), 9 as cited in Estep Jr., “Wesley's Formal Education Philosophy,” 43.; Gross, \textit{John Wesley: Christian Educator}, 14.; Towns, “John Wesley and Religious Education,” 318, 323.}

But whilst acknowledging him as a pioneer Towns also contends that his methods and theories for educating children were not new discoveries. Rather it is his view that, like many in the eighteenth century establishment, Wesley had no concept of childhood as being separate from adulthood. We will discuss this in the context of considering
Wesley’s views on how children should be taught but for now we note that Towns considered him to be merely a product of his times in the field of education. More recently, Heitzenrater has commented that Wesley didn’t develop any new child psychology trends nor was he an educational theorist. Despite this he believes that Wesley’s influence on children and education cannot be ignored given his role as the founder of one of the largest Protestant denominations worldwide. An influence which was not only seen and felt in eighteenth century England but which continues to be felt over two hundred years after his death. On initial consideration we must agree with Towns and Heitzenrater that he was not an educational innovator. After all, as we shall see, many of his views and much of his thinking can be traced back to the theories and practices of people such as his mother, Johann Amos Comenius, John Locke, Law and others. That said his views were not merely their views taken verbatim. Rather he extracted from each the ideas and thoughts which best fitted within his overriding mission of seeing lives being conformed to Jesus Christ. He then took those ideas and repackaged them in a different way. So then, contra Towns and Heitzenrater, Wesley was an innovator, not because he developed new ideas of his own (though he did) but because he brought together views from a number of theorists and practitioners into a new methodology. What can we say then about Gross and Towns’ views that Wesley was a pioneer in education? In the sense that he broke new ground and led the way in some areas at least, we have to agree with Gross and Towns that he was. In an age when economic considerations predominated, where schools were regarded with suspicion in some quarters, and formal education was predominantly seen as being the preserve of the middle and upper classes, Wesley’s view that children of all socio-economic classes should be formally educated in schools was indeed breaking new ground.

34 Ibid.
36 See, for example, Green, John Wesley, 11.
37 See, for example, Towns, “John Wesley and Religious Education,” 319.
39 Ibid., 34.
41 See, for example, de Mandeville’s views as discussed in Ibid., 291-92.
42 For much of the eighteenth century education was primarily available to children of the middle and upper classes. There were various reasons for this including cost and the inability of poor
In summary then we recall that our conclusion in the previous chapter was that Wesley believed that children could be glorified, which is to say that after death they could be restored to the state of perfection they enjoyed when God created human beings as part of creation. We also recognised that he believed that they were able to live sanctified, holy lives here on earth fulfilling the two greatest commandments - to love God and love their neighbour. Our discussion of why he saw education as important and how he implemented his views in innovative and pioneering ways has revealed that this is what he saw education being able to achieve.

Avoid What?

If this was the aim of education what shape must education take? This is the question which had exercised Wesley’s mind as he considered two tracts that caused him to review the pedagogy of Charterhouse School as well as other schools which were held in similar high esteem in, and around, London. As he did so he spoke frequently with “sensible men” presumably to help him formulate his thoughts.

In the course of his pondering he identified a number of reasons why schools were failing to accomplish what he was convinced was the aim of education. The first of these was that most schools were placed in or near the larger towns. Such placement brought corruptive influences and too many material distractions which would divert the children from their education.

Wesley’s response was to site Kingswood School approximately three miles outside Bristol. He chose the site because it was near, but not too close to, a large

farmers to release their children from work. Above all however there appears to have been an attitude that children should be educated according to their station in life and that to educate poor children for anything but to work as trades-people, and the like, would be a threat to the established social order. The attempts that were made to educate the children of the poor were reliant on the largesse of philanthropists. However, even with such beneficence backing them these attempts were largely unsuccessful. At the end of the century the number of schools which catered for the poor was still inadequate and those that were operating were still only providing education seen to be fitting to the low station in life of the poor and the need for trained labour in society. See also John Rule, Albion’s People: English Society, 1714-1815 (London: Longman, 1992), 140-48.; William Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England (Oxford: Clarendon, 1765), 449-51 as cited in Ivy Pinchbeck and Margaret Hewitt, Children in English Society vol 2: From the Eighteenth Century to the Children Act 1948 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 367.

Charterhouse School, which Wesley attended from the age of 10 until the age of 16 when he went to Oxford University, was considered, at least by some, to be one of the finest schools in the world at the time. Wesley remembers his time at the school as being formative for his spiritual development and seems to have considered his time there favourably. Tomkins, John Wesley, 48.


Ibid., para. 3, 290.
town. It was also relatively remote being away from major roads. Here he built a house (Kingswood being a boarding school) catering for fifty children plus the teachers and servants.  

In a further effort to eliminate the chances of students at the school being corrupted, by outside influences, Wesley implemented two rules. The first was that parents were not to take their child out of school for even one day, until they left the school for good. Once admitted, his second rule took effect whereby the children were not allowed to play, mix, and certainly not fight, with children from the surrounding area.  

Once again the character of his mother looms large as his actions in implementing these rules are reminiscent of her attempts to segregate Wesley and his siblings from other children. Susanna Wesley had insulated her children from other children, forbidding them from playing or associating with all but some middle and upper-class families. This rule was only broken, and then not by her, following the 1709 fire which destroyed the family's home in the Epworth Rectory. The children were taken in by various friends and neighbours while the rectory was being rebuilt. On their return Susanna records her annoyance that the children had learnt songs, picked up bad habits previously unknown to them, and their behaviour had become rude and clownish. This was certainly not the behaviour she expected of, nor which she had previously developed in, her children.

However it was not just corruption from outside influences that Wesley sought to eliminate. By requiring that students always be in the presence of a teacher he attempted to stop them teaching each other to sin as would happen if they were allowed to follow their own natural deprived instincts without supervision.

Wesley implemented multiple safeguards in order to avoid the corruption of children. These actions he took with the singular aim of maximising the chances that children would be able to live a life characterised by holiness in this world and glorification in the next.

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46 Ibid., para. 8, 292.
47 Wesley, "A Plain Account of Kingswood School," para. 11, 293; "Remarks on Kingswood School," 302.
48 Green, John Wesley, 11.
49 Tomkins, John Wesley, 15.
50 Wesley, "A Plain Account of Kingswood School," no. 12, 294.
Teach Who?

Wesley’s determination to minimise the chances of corruption extended to his views on who should be taught. It is here that we encounter his second belief as to why schools were unsuccessful in achieving the aim of education. He was scathing of the indiscriminate admittance policy of most, if not all, schools whereby all middle and upper-class children were admitted regardless of their level of “religion.”

His concern was that as a result of this policy children were unlikely to “retain much religion.” That is to say that he did not believe education was the right of all children. Rather it was his view that it was only for those children who were seeking after God and whose parents wanted them to have a religious education.

This seems to have been the only distinction Wesley made. Certainly he did not discriminate on the basis of socio-economic status willingly educating poor children. In this he did not share the concerns of those on whose beneficence he relied to fund his schools that if the poor learnt to read it would lead to upward mobility or unrest.

The approach Wesley took to recruiting students for admission to Kingswood School reflected these views. In order to be considered for a place a prospective student had to convince him they had not already rejected God’s offer of saving grace. In addition the parents had to convince him that they wanted their child to have a right relationship with God. It is clear therefore that his admission standards were spiritually high. However academic ability does not seem to have been a consideration.

A desire that their child be saved was not, however, all that Wesley required of parents. Before he would accept their child into the school they were required to read and agree to the rules of the school. Interestingly, one of these rules was that the maximum age for admission was twelve (the minimum was six). It was Wesley’s belief that before that age the bias towards sin inherent in all humans from birth as a result of the fall had not completely taken root and hence there was the possibility that through education that bias could be corrected and the child turned toward God. Presumably

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51 Ibid., para. 4, 290.
52 Ibid.
56 Wesley, “A Short Account of Kingswood School,” no. 2, 283; “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” para. 10, 293.
in having a strict age cut off at this point Wesley was also saying that after this age the aims of education would be far more difficult to achieve if the child had not been educated properly earlier. That is to say, it was Wesley’s contention that a child’s worldview was more capable of being changed before the age of thirteen.

A maximum admission age of twelve also accords with his belief that by the age of thirteen a person must have accepted God’s gift of faith as we saw in the previous chapter. I suggest that he assumed that if the 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 which was designed to empower them to live holy lives fulfilling the two greatest commandments

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind

Love your neighbour as yourself.

After all what was the point of educating someone who did not want a relationship with God and who did not want to be restored to the state of perfection humanity enjoyed when God created human beings as part of creation.

We begin therefore to detect a familiar pattern as we recognise how Wesley was careful to limit who was educated in order to ensure that those whose chances of being glorified were given every possible chance of achieving that state. That is to say he attempted to ensure that their chances of so doing were not diminished by contact with those who might lead them astray. It is also of note that Wesley chose to concentrate his efforts on children who were of an age where they were likely to be more open to a change in their worldview from one which was focused on the innate, deprived nature with which they were born, to one which focused on God.

**Taught by Whom?**

As we have observed, Wesley firmly held to the belief that parents should follow the scriptural command to

Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.

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From this it is clear that he saw the first educators of children as their parents. That is he saw the primary responsibility for educating children lay initially with the parents until such time as they are of an age to go to school. At this point the primary responsibility for their education shifted from the parents to school teachers.\(^{61}\)

It is at this point that we recognise that another area where Wesley felt schools were not being selective enough was when choosing school teachers. His concern here was that non-Christian school teachers, and those who saw the religious aspects of a child’s life as not being their concern, would not help the child develop its Christian faith. Even worse, in his view, they might actively encourage the child to look for answers outside Christianity.\(^{62}\)

His concern with school teachers did not end there however. He also held that even those teachers living sanctified, holy lives could cause their students to end up worse, rather than better, off when they did not employ the correct pedagogical techniques, including managing and disciplining the children correctly. Discipline for instance, said Wesley, should be neither too strict nor too lax for either extreme would frustrate the student. The danger, in his opinion, was that the child would equate such discipline with Christianity causing it to “stink in the[ir] nostrils.” This was a concern for Wesley because under such circumstances any move to accept God’s offer of salvation would be at least delayed, if not frustrated altogether.\(^{63}\)

That said, for Wesley the teacher’s spirituality was more important than their skill in teaching. Indeed it was on this that he judged the suitability of applicants for both teaching positions and the role of Headmaster at his schools.\(^{64}\)

Gross concludes that Wesley saw the failure of religious education as resulting from teacher failure. That is partially true but ignores his other concerns about eighteenth century education. Rather we are best to say that he saw one of the

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\(^{60}\) Prov 22:6.

\(^{61}\) Wesley, “Sermon 94, ”On Family Religion”, 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. “A Short Account of Kingswood School,” para. 2, 283.


\(^{63}\) Wesley, “A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children,” para. 6, 476.

reasons for the failure of religious education as teacher failure arising from some being non-Christian, as well as from poor classroom management and instruction methods.\(^\text{65}\)

Before considering how he implemented his views regarding appropriate teachers we pause to remember that there was one other group of people whom Wesley expected to educate children, that being his preachers. This is evident from his response to the question “In what particular method should we instruct them?“\(^\text{66}\) wherein he specified that they should spend at least an hour a week with children. We will discuss what he expected them to teach the children, and how, later in this chapter. For now we note that such was the importance Wesley placed on this being part of the role of his preachers that he said

Gift or no gift, you are to do it ; else you are not called to be a Methodist Preacher.\(^\text{67}\)

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 his newly built Kingswood School. He was not prepared to compromise his standards however and eventually succeeded in hiring sufficient men\(^\text{68}\) who were devoted to, and whose motive for teaching was purely to glorify, God.\(^\text{69}\)

He also provided his approval of the work of several women whom he considered to have the appropriate spiritual qualifications and motivation to be teachers. In doing so he endorsed them, and their schools, as suitable for Methodists to send their girls to.\(^\text{70}\)

Once again we see how Wesley took actions designed to ensure that children were prepared for glorification, in part, through education. In this instance he was careful to provide children with appropriate role models, be they parents, teachers or preachers. His inclusion of the latter, who were required to meet very high standards as ones called to ministry within the Methodist church,\(^\text{71}\) highlights how highly he valued this

\(^{66}\) This question and Wesley’s response is included in “the plan of discipline as practised in the Methodist connexion during the life of Mr. Wesley.” “Minutes of Several Conversations,” 299 n., question. 33, 315-16.
\(^{67}\) Ibid., question. 33, 316.
\(^{68}\) The teaching staff at Kingswood School was, at least in the initial stages, all male. See, for example, Wesley, “Remarks on Kingswood School,” 302.
\(^{69}\) Wesley, “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” para. 8, 292.
\(^{71}\) Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations,” question. 47, II, 323-24. and as detailed in the previous chapter.
task. What is also of significance is that he would not compromise his standards regarding teachers and was prepared to wait until the right people were available rather than appoint any who did not meet his high standards with respect to their spirituality.

**Teach What?**

Having the right teachers was a good start but it was not sufficient to ensure that the aim of education would be realised. In order to maximise the possibility of this happening it was important, in Wesley’s estimation, that not only should the right subjects be taught but also the right teaching materials be used. This is to say, the curriculum must consist of the appropriate subjects and the textbooks from which children learnt must also be suitable.\(^{72}\)

These beliefs caused him to be troubled by the inadequacy of the curriculum employed in most eighteenth century schools. He lamented that children learnt little, if any, arithmetic, reading, geography, chronology or languages (Hebrew, Greek and Latin). Commenting on the inadequacy of language teaching he scathingly remarked on the ineffectiveness of what little teaching was undertaken. The problem as he saw it was largely due to the use of what he deemed to be unsatisfactory textbooks. He was highly critical of those schools who not only did not teach children the way of salvation but who by assigning books with moral standards at odds with Christianity encouraged them to continue in sin.\(^{73}\)

When we recognise Wesley’s concerns about the adequacy of teaching in such general subjects as arithmetic, reading, writing and the like, and we recall his advice to parents to remember that their child needs to be prepared for the world to come,\(^{74}\) we discern a key element of his educational philosophy. That is that education is not just learning the general subjects nor is it just learning the doctrines of Christianity but it is a combination of both. With this blend of subjects the child receives a comprehensive education and is equipped to live a truly Christian life in this world and the next. It was therefore important in Wesley’s eyes that when parents chose a school for their children they chose one where the teachers were ever mindful of the need to equip children for both this world and the next. In Wesley’s words ones who instructed children “in religion and learning together.”\(^{75}\)

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\(^{72}\) For example Wesley, “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” no. 13-14, 295.

\(^{73}\) Ibid., no. 7, 291-92.


\(^{75}\) Ibid.
Gross comments that it was at Kingswood School that Wesley was determined to have an educational program which would be, at least in some respects, superior to anything he had seen.\textsuperscript{76} For this reason he implemented rigorous requirements covering all aspects of life at the school including detailing the curriculum to be followed and the textbooks to be used.\textsuperscript{77}

Considering first the curriculum it is clear that, at Kingswood School, Wesley followed through on his requirement that education teach a combination of general subjects and Christian doctrines. With respect to the general subjects every boy undertook a course of study in reading, writing, arithmetic, English, history, geography, chronology, rhetoric, logic, ethics, geometry, algebra and physics. To this was added the study of languages where the children learnt the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek as well as the classical languages of French and Latin. Other general subjects included learning music, gardening on fine days, philosophical experimentation, and participation in other work in the house on wet days.\textsuperscript{78} In this way the children were prepared for a productive life in the world.

In order to prepare them to live in the next world with God, as well as to live as Christians in this world, the children also learnt Christian doctrines and practices. They spent time in prayer, meditation and self-examination and attended compulsory church services at the school every day. On Sundays they were required to attend two public church services which, no doubt, was part of Wesley’s use of public instruction as a means of education. Apart from attendance at these services the children learnt and sang hymns throughout the day and had private instruction with their teachers in the late afternoon.\textsuperscript{79} Whilst Wesley did not articulate what was involved in this private instruction it is a safe assumption that, given it took place on Sunday, it included formal instruction in Christian doctrines and the like.

Wesley’s commitment to ensuring that the children were educated correctly is evidenced by the efforts to which he went to ensure that the textbooks used were appropriate. In the case of language textbooks he only permitted the use of those that...

\textsuperscript{77} Wesley, “A Short Account of Kingswood School,” no. 5, 285-88.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., no. 1-5, 283-88. With respect to the philosophical experiments Wesley notes that some boys worked on these before breakfast but does not tell us what those experiments entailed.
were both consistent between each other in the form of the language used, and faithful to what he saw as the purity, strength and elegance of their mother tongue.\footnote{Wesley, “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” no. 13, 295.}

As to textbooks for other subjects he only authorised ones that were at least aligned with Christian morality and teachings so that nothing offensive or profane could be introduced to the children.\footnote{As already noted, John Locke’s \textit{Essay on Human Understanding} for instance, was required reading as cited in Prince, \textit{Wesley on Religious Education}, 103; Estep Jr., “Wesley’s Formal Education Philosophy.” 45. See also Body, \textit{John Wesley and Education}, 61.} In addition he also required the children to read other books which promoted sound sense and Christian morality. Such a requirement was in keeping with his belief that children should be taught the things of God in a manner, and at a level, which ensured they were best placed to understand what they were being taught. That is they were to be taught in an age and developmentally appropriate manner.\footnote{Wesley, “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” no. 15, 295.}

His efforts as regards textbooks did not end with authorising the use of pre-existing material though. In actions reminiscent of his mother, who finding no books that met her strict requirements wrote her own,\footnote{Susanna Wesley is known to have written \textit{An Exposition of the Apostles Creed, An Exposition of the Ten Commandments} and \textit{Religious Conference Written for the Use of My Children}.} Wesley also spent much of the winter of 1750 editing and rewriting books for the school. These included \textit{Foxe’s Book of Martyrs} as well as English, French, Greek, Hebrew and Latin grammars. The scale of this exercise is evident when we realise that these textbooks alone comprised 1,729 printed pages.\footnote{Tomkins, \textit{John Wesley}, 136. Also Gross, \textit{John Wesley: Christian Educator}, 12 as cited in Towns, “John Wesley and Religious Education,” 318-19.}

Finally we recognise that further evidence of Wesley’s commitment to the aim of education is found in his instructions to his preachers. In providing them with the methodology to be employed when they met one on one with children he required that they conclude the session by reinforcing the desirability of salvation and of the need to live a Christian life in the future.\footnote{Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations,” question. 13, 306.} In this way Wesley implemented his view that children must be instructed “in religion.”\footnote{Wesley, “Sermon 94, “On Family Religion”,” III.3, 83.}

Here then, we see a key action by which Wesley sought to equip children for both this world and the next. By ensuring that children learnt both general subjects and Christian doctrines and practices he maximised the chances of children being so equipped. His commitment to ensuring that only textbooks which promoted Christian
morality, or at least were in keeping with it, is particularly notable not least because he was prepared to write his own where necessary to meet this objective.

**Teach How?**

With an understanding of Wesley’s views as to why education was important, who could take advantage of it and what they should be taught, as well as recognising the high ideals he held in respect of the qualities required of teachers we turn to consider his views on the teaching methods to be employed. As we do we find that his teaching methodology revolved around the four key principles of teaching children early, plainly, frequently, and with perseverance.87

As regards teaching them early Wesley required that the child’s education should begin as soon as the parents “perceive reason begins to dawn.”88 In this he no doubt took his cue from his mother whose education of Wesley and his siblings began with them learning the Lord’s Prayer as soon as they could talk. To this were added other prayers as well as Bible readings (which they were required to memorise) as they grew older.89

It was also at this very early age that Wesley believed that parents should begin the process of turning the child toward God. This he expected them to do by taking every opportunity to speak of the things of God. Using this method, he asserted, best enabled the child to begin to understand the truth in a way which is appropriate to its stage of development. For instance, using the example of the child seeing the sun he demonstrated how a parent could, by beginning with the child’s knowledge of something (in this case the warmth of the sun) and through the use of various linkages, help the child understand God’s love for it. In detailing this example Wesley was not only teaching this methodology to his hearers he was also highlighting what he saw as a key task of education. This being that every opportunity should be taken to speak of God’s love, as well as of how God governs and maintains creation.90

Starting early is good but it was not enough in Wesley’s thinking. He believed that whatever is said to the child must be said in a way that is easily understood by the child and the best way to do this is to use its current knowledge as the base.91 By adding

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87 Ibid., III.6, 81.
88 Ibid.
91 Ibid., III.7, 81-82.
new information to that base the chances of the child understanding what it is taught are greatly increased. This was a priority for Wesley for it ensured that the child learnt to think and so grow in wisdom.92

The importance Wesley placed on children understanding what they were taught is evident from his difficulty with how textbooks were used. Not only were they inadequate but it was his belief that they were being used in the wrong order. The problem as he saw it was that in some cases younger children were required to read difficult books before they read the easier ones. Possibly influenced by the Dutch educator Comenius,93 whose educational principles included the idea that teaching should not go onto a new subject until the former is completely understood,94 Wesley’s solution was that the order should be reversed.95

In order to ensure that one’s teaching is effective it must also be frequent, Wesley believed. Using the example of providing physical nourishment three times a day he advocated that the child’s soul (which he reminded his hearers is of no less value than the physical body) needs to be fed three times daily also.96

The final of the four principles of teaching he outlined was perseverance. When children are slow to learn or are boisterous or disobedient, as some will be, Wesley warned that the temptation will be to say that teaching is too difficult and to give up. Whilst he did not see giving up as an option he informed his hearers that the only way

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93 Johann (often referred to as John in encyclopaedia entries) Amos Comenius was a Bohemian educator and theologian who lived from 1592-1670. He is credited with keeping the faith of his church alive and providing the inspiration for the Moravian Church of which he was its leader and last bishop. As regards education he advocated that the provision of compulsory (full time) education, as well as kindergarten training, was the obligation of the state. He was also the publisher of the first successfully illustrated textbook for children (published 1658). Nelly Shargo Hoyt, “Comenius, John Amos,” in Merit Students Encyclopedia, vol. 5 (New York: P.F. Collier, 1982), 140; John E. Sadler, “John Amos Comenius,” Britannica Online Encyclopedia, November 29, 2009, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/127493/John-Amos-Comenius# (accessed 29 November 2009).


95 Wesley, “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” no. 6, 291.

96 Wesley, “Sermon 94, "On Family Religion",” III.9, 82.
that they would gain the strength to persevere was to seek, and be empowered by, the power of God.\textsuperscript{97}

In employing these principles Wesley expected that all who teach children (parents, teachers, preachers and others) would do more than merely speak to them. He also expected that they would model appropriate Christian behaviour.\textsuperscript{98} This is no more evident than when he cited the Greek teachers who taught their students to think and act like them. In doing so he asked how much more important it is for teachers to model exemplary Christian lives if children are to be taught to live similarly in all they think, say and do.\textsuperscript{99}

Once again it was at Kingswood School that Wesley was able to implement his views regarding the methodology to be used when teaching children. It was here that he was also able to indulge his proclivity for creating and implementing rules and methods.\textsuperscript{100} Indeed the importance of rules as part of good education for Wesley is confirmed by his own comments in 1786 and later in 1789 that Kingswood was operating just as he liked because the rules were being observed as evidenced by the children’s good behaviour.\textsuperscript{101}

These rules governed all aspects of school life including the discipline regimes to be used, the activities to be undertaken and the timetable to be followed. It was a rigid daily regime where the activities and times were pre-determined and there was no allowance (at least in Wesley’s intentions) for them to be deviated from. This becomes clear when we consider that the daily timetable, from Monday through Saturday, was\textsuperscript{102}

\begin{itemize}
\item 4:00 am Wake up – private time consisting of reading, singing, praying (the children were taught to pray by the use of a short prepared prayer until
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., III.10, 82-83.
\textsuperscript{100} Both Tomkins, John Wesley, 26 and; Green, John Wesley, 21. note that Wesley began writing new rules for himself which were to govern how he should live, how his time should be spent, the kind of company he should avoid and the attitudes he wanted to cultivate. Tomkins also notes how, in 1744, Wesley took the opportunity of the formation of the Methodist connexion to demand conformity to his rules and theology in order to “ensure that members and leaders were all doctrinally, morally and organizationally sound” and that in the 1760’s he continued to pass a number of rules through the conferences of the Methodists. John Wesley, 115, 166.
\textsuperscript{102} Wesley, “A Short Account of Kingswood School,” no.5, 285-86.
they were capable of praying in their own words) and for those capable of them, self-examination, and meditation.

5:00 am Meeting together.

6:00 am Breakfast.

7:00 am Language instruction (Hebrew, Greek, French and Latin).

9:00 am Instruction in general subjects (reading, writing and the like).

11:00 am Work (gardening if fine, inside the house if raining) or walk in the school grounds.

Noon Lunch followed by work (as above) or singing.

1:00 pm Language instruction.

4:00 pm Instruction in general subjects.

5:00 pm Private prayer followed by work (as above) or walking in the school grounds and the evening meal.

7:00 pm Church service.

8:00 pm Retire to bed.

It is worth noting that all the boys, from ages six to fourteen, observed this regime although there is some indication that the older boys may have gone to bed slightly later than eight pm.103 Here again we see the influence of his own childhood wherein it was the practice for him and his siblings to be in bed by eight pm with the youngest going first.104

The question may be asked as to how this compares with his mother’s regime. As regards the time spent in tuition we note that whereas Wesley, as a child, would have had six hours of lessons per day he imposed eight hours of lessons on the boys at Kingswood School. He did however retain his mother’s two hour lunch break.105

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103 Ibid., no.5, 285.
105 Tomkins, John Wesley, 14.
Sunday was the only day off from school lessons. However the boys’ day was still strictly regimented. Rising at four am the day begins to differ from the other six days of the week when a more leisurely breakfast was eaten at the earlier time of six am. From seven am the children learnt hymns or poems until they attended a public church service at nine am. Between the end of that service and attendance at another public church service at two pm they ate lunch at noon and sang. At four pm they had private instruction - presumably one on one although this is not stated by Wesley.\(^{106}\)

Noticeable by its absence in this regime is the chance for any childhood play, with the only recreation allowed the boys being walks in the grounds of the school. Like his mother Wesley believed that a child should never be allowed to play or be involved in any form of recreation.\(^{107}\) Several theories have been suggested as to the basis of this belief. It may have been a reaction to his days at Charterhouse School where according to Gross he was bullied by the bigger students during the time allowed for play and recreation.\(^{108}\) Another theory is that it can be traced to the Moravian influence on Wesley which suggests that it originated from an old German proverb.

Green suggests that it is his mother’s influence that we see\(^{109}\) and Wesley’s own Journal supports this view as by recording in full his mother’s letter outlining her pedagogy he clearly indicates his agreement with it.\(^{110}\) We also know that Wesley believed that playing as a child resulted in playing as an adult.\(^{111}\) On this reasoning he could not understand why play was necessary or desirable\(^{112}\) presumably because, as he saw it, playing as a child encouraged one not to take life seriously as an adult. Obviously this was an unacceptable state of affairs for Wesley.

As we have seen Wesley decided which textbooks were to be used in the school. He also specified in detail, when they were to be used. In this way he was able to put into effect his belief that children should be reading those textbooks etc which are appropriate to their age and stages of understanding and development. This ensured that the order in which all books were read was consistently from simpler to harder.\(^{113}\)

\(^{106}\) Wesley, “A Short Account of Kingswood School,” no.5, 286.
\(^{107}\) Tomkins, John Wesley, 12; Green, John Wesley, 11.
\(^{109}\) Green, John Wesley, 135.
\(^{110}\) Wesley, “Journal Entry for August 1, 1742,” 387-91.
\(^{111}\) Wesley, “A Short Account of Kingswood School,” no.5, 285.
\(^{112}\) Green, John Wesley, 80.
\(^{113}\) Wesley, “A Short Account of Kingswood School,” no. 6, 286-88; “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” no. 15, 295.
Whilst Kingswood School is a prime example of where Wesley implemented his views on how children should be taught it is not the only one. He also detailed what he expected his preachers to do in this regard. For instance, in *Minutes of Several Conversations* being “the plan of discipline as practised in the Methodist connexion”\(^{114}\) during his lifetime, he tells his preachers they must visit each home. 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.\(^{115}\)

Additionally each preacher, having spoken corporately with the members of the household, was also required to spend individual time with each, including children, in a separate room. Once again we detect echoes of his own childhood when his mother would spend one evening a week with each child individually, a practice which we know Wesley enjoyed.\(^{116}\)

With respect to 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 it was learning. In this he displayed a deep compassion for children as he instructed his preachers on ways to not only elicit the child’s responses but also on how to ensure the child did not get too stressed by the exercise and hence discouraged. One example he gives, for instance, is to answer the question for the child thereby relieving it of the stress of answering.\(^{117}\)

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 what they needed to do in order to be regenerated. To reinforce the desirability of the latter he required that this session conclude with an exhortation designed to convince the child that it needed to be regenerated and avoid sin in the future.\(^{118}\)

Such is the importance that Wesley attached to his preachers teaching children that he made it a condition of a call to the Methodist pulpit. This is the import of his conclusion to his answer to his own rhetorical question “But what shall we do for the

\(^{114}\) Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations,” 299 n.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., question. 13, 305; question. 33, 315.


\(^{117}\) Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations,” question. 13, 305-7.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., question, 13, 305-6.
rising generation?”

Having outlined again what he required of his preachers, and anticipating that some of his preachers would say they have no gift for working with children, he says

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.  

Criticism

Not unsurprisingly Wesley was criticised by some of his contemporaries for his approach to education. One of the best examples of Wesley’s defence of his methods is that which he records in A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children. Printed in 1783, it details his response to the objections from an unnamed man as to the emphasis which Wesley gave to religious education. This person believed it wrong to talk with children on matters of religion too often and especially more often than the children desired. He contended that this methodology did not have the desired effect on children but did more harm than good. He had further suggested that many of those so educated were worse than others once the constraints of the school were removed. That is, rather than being brought back into right relationship with God he maintained they became more heathen than they were before their education began.

Wesley’s response makes interesting reading. First he noted that his critic’s views were at odds with the judgement of other wise men. He pressed this point by sarcastically noting that if what his critic believed was true then immeasurable harm was being done in various Christian schools including his own at Kingswood. His tone makes it clear that he did not believe this to be the case.

In refuting his critic’s views Wesley did not deny that some educated using his methods still grew up to be worse than others but did not accept the assertion that they were in the majority. He observed that those who did fail the system were those who were either never converted or, if they were, chose to deviate from the path of righteousness and through their own actions “made shipwreck of the faith.” That is to say they turned their back on God having once believed and been saved. So whilst acknowledging that some end up worse than before they started he did not accept that

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119 Ibid., question. 33, 316.
120 Ibid.
122 For ease of description I will use “critic” to describe the unnamed man whose views Wesley responded to.
his methods were in error rather blaming the students for the situation they found
themselves in. Nor did he admit that this proved his critic's case, declaring instead that
the majority of graduates of the Christian education system (or at least of the three
schools he mentioned) carried on living lives wholly dedicated to God. Clearly then
Wesley was convinced that his pedagogical methods were the right ones.

Wesley was not only criticised by some of his contemporaries however. Again not
unsurprisingly he and his educational endeavours have been critiqued after his death.
Here we will look at the critique of one area returning to the question of his conception,
and understanding, of childhood. In doing so we recognise that, as Tranter, controversy
surrounds whether children were seen as little adults, that is there being no
concept of childhood as being separate from adulthood, in the eighteenth century. This
is borne out by the work of Willhauck who cites John Demos and Lawrence Stone as
taking the view that they were seen as little adults, a view shared by Ivy Pinchbeck
and Margaret Hewitt. Citing the later work of Philip Greven, Sandra Lee Piercy, and
Linda A. Pollock, Willhauck concludes, however, that there is insufficient
evidence to suggest that children were seen as little adults during Wesley's lifetime.
This may be true however given that the historians she cites do not agree amongst
themselves on this I suggest it is more appropriate to say that there is insufficient
evidence on which to decide whether children were or were not seen as little adults in
the eighteenth century.

The “children as little adults” theory is important to our consideration of Wesley’s
views of childhood as some of those who believe that it was the prevailing theory of

\[\text{124} \text{Ibid., para. 3, 475.}\]
\[\text{125} \text{Donald Tranter, “John Wesley and the Education of Children,” in Issues in Education: Some}
\text{Methodist Perspectives, ed. Tim Macquiban, Westminster Wesley Series 4 (Oxford: Applied}
\text{Theology Press, 1996), 30-31.}\]
\[\text{126} \text{John Demos, A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony (Oxford: Oxford}
\text{Foundations for Contemporary Christian Education” (A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor}
\text{of Philosophy, Catholic University of America, 1992), 99.}\]
\[\text{128} \text{Pinchbeck and Hewitt, Children in English Society vol 1, 297; Pinchbeck and Hewitt, Children}
\text{in English Society vol 2, 348.}\]
\[\text{129} \text{Philip Greven, The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious}
\text{Experience, and the Self in Early America, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1977), n.p. as cited in}
\text{Willhauck, “View of Children,” 99.}\]
\[\text{130} \text{Sandra Lee Piercy, “The Cradle of Salvation: Children and Religion in Late Sixteenth and}
\text{Early Seventeenth Century England,” 1982, 81, 116, 156 as cited in Willhauck, “View of}
\text{Children,” 97, 99.}\]
\[\text{131} \text{Linda A. Pollock, Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900 (Cambridge:}
\[\text{132} \text{Willhauck, “View of Children,” 97.}\]
childhood in his lifetime suggest that it was his belief also. Tranter’s views here are worth consideration in a little detail. Whilst he does not state that he believed Wesley saw children as little adults it can I suggest be reasonably inferred from his comments. Certainly he contends that Wesley wanted “to dispense with childhood.” As proof of this Tranter offers a number of examples from Wesley’s Journal where he writes of the faith of children as young as three years of age as well as highlighting Wesley’s joy at children whose behaviour was like that of mature adults. The possibility that Wesley was attempting “to dispense with childhood” is one explanation for his writing about their faith and for his recording of his joy at their behaviour. However as we saw in a previous chapter it is more plausible, given his conviction that “whenever the Holy Ghost teaches, there is no delay in learning” that he is rejoicing in the maturity of faith that is available to even children as evidenced by these young ones.

In addition our survey of his educational views, and of his implementation of them, has revealed that Wesley did not see children as little adults. For example, as Willhauck notes, this is demonstrated by his resolve that children are taught and are enabled to learn in an age and developmentally appropriate manner. The importance which he attaches to this is obvious as it permeates his educational pedagogy. It is the determining factor in how children are taught, as well as in deciding which books they are to read and when. Further evidence that Wesley did not see children as little adults is found in his promotion of schools as appropriate vehicles for educating children. As Pinchbeck and Hewitt observe, the school is a separate institution designed with children in mind and as such recognises the status of childhood as independent of, and different from, adulthood.

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135 Ibid., III.8, 82.
137 Wesley, “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” no. 15, 295.
However this does not, of itself, answer the contention of Gerald R. Cragg, Green or Tranter that Wesley lacked any real insight into how children thought or acted. Of these three only Tranter provides us with his reasoning for his belief. He declares that beyond any shadow of a doubt Wesley “rejoiced to see children behaving as little adults” and cites Wesley’s “no play” rule as one basis for his conclusion. Whilst Wesley instituted this rule in order to ensure that children not develop bad habits which would see them playing as adults (which he saw as undesirable) it does suggest, that at least in this instance, he did not understand the nature of childhood.

Wesley’s regime may have been strict and there may be some controversy surrounding his “no play” rule but at least we can say that he, again, took those actions he deemed necessary to maximise the chances of children being glorified. His methods may not be what we would consider suitable in the twenty-first century but we cannot doubt the sincerity of his belief that they were the only way to achieve the aim of education. As such we cannot doubt that it was from his thinking regarding children in his theology that his motives for such a regime originated.

**Teach Where?**

Having reviewed the operation of Kingswood School we are now in a better position to reflect on Wesley’s views in respect of where children should be educated. Previously we noted that he saw the nurturing environment of the home as important in children’s education. For this reason he believed that the primary responsibility for educating children lay initially with the parents until such time as they are of an age to go to school. This signals that he saw at least two places of education as important, being the home and the school. From his writings we see that another was what he called “public means of instruction.”

It was Wesley’s view that children needed to be started on the right path early. For him a key part of doing so was teaching them everything they needed to know in order to be saved and thereby empowering them to love God and their neighbour. Every

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141 Green, *John Wesley*, 135.
143 Ibid.
144 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. Wesley, “A Short Account of Kingswood School,” para. 2, 283.
opportunity for this needed to be taken both inside the house (for example, individual and corporate (family) prayer, reading, meditation etc) and outside the house presumably such things as attending church services and Sunday School for he specifically mentions Sunday. Here we recall that he required his preachers to be part of the home education as they visited the homes of those in their society to, amongst other tasks, teach the children.\footnote{Wesley, “Minutes of Several Conversations,” question. 13, 305-7.}

Once again, it is one of his sermons that provides the best picture of Wesley’s view regarding the schools. As we have seen it was in Sermon 94 \textit{On Family Religion} that he provided Christian parents with advice as to what to take into account when they undertook the difficult task of deciding which school to send their child to. Remembering that he believed schools must prepare children for both this world and the next we note that he considered that this type of education was only possible where there was a small teacher to student ratio for he warns parents against sending the children to large schools. This was important to Wesley because, as we have seen, he believed that children needed to be under the supervision of the teachers at all times in order to ensure they did not teach each other to sin. He was also critical, to say the least, of public schools citing them as “nurseries of all manner of wickedness” where children were led astray from fearing God and therefore from salvation.\footnote{Wesley, “Sermon 94, “On Family Religion”,” III.13, 83.}

We need to realise at this point that Wesley drew a distinction between the education of boys and girls. His preference, similar to that of his mother,\footnote{Whilst there is no record that his mother specifically advocated this nevertheless none of Wesley’s sisters were sent away to school as he and his brothers were. Ibid., III.15, 84.} was that boys should be sent away to school whilst girls should be educated at home where possible. Therefore he advised that boys should be sent to private schools run by a Christian man and that, where it was not possible for a girl to be educated at home, she should be sent to a school run by a Christian woman. In both cases the schools chosen should have small teacher to student ratios for the reason noted above.\footnote{Ibid., III.13-15, 83-84.}

Wesley implemented his views in founding and maintaining Kingswood School as has been adequately detailed elsewhere in this work. All that is left to note at this juncture is that he attempted to enforce a small student to teacher ratio. It appears that he saw the optimum ratio as seventeen children to one teacher given his comment in
Remarks on the State of Kingswood School (dated 1783), that three masters was a sufficient number for the fifty boys the school catered for.\footnote{Wesley, “Remarks on Kingswood School,” 302.}

Where children were to receive their education was as important as every other aspect of Wesley’s thinking. He recognised that the environment needed to be conducive not only to them being able to learn well but also to them receiving the attention necessary to maximise their chances of being glorified. We see this in his belief that the education of children must start in the nurturing environment of their home. It is also evident in his view that children should also be taught in church and Sunday School for it is here that we would expect their teachers would be those who wanted to see them glorified. Finally we recognise it in his assertion that the best schools are those where the teacher to student ratio is small, and hence each child is able to receive the individual attention necessary to ensure that they receive the religious education necessary for them to be empowered to live sanctified lives.

So here again we see yet another example of Wesley taking every possible action that he could conceive of to maximise the chances of children being equipped to live in both this world and the next. Once again we see his theological convictions evident as he prescribes the best places for children to be educated.

**Divine Connection**

Our focus to this point, as we have identified Wesley’s educational views and their implementation, has primarily been on those which were played out in the natural realm of the human world. Recognising that the focus of all he did was the restoration of the child’s relationship with God it is at this point that we explore, in greater depth, the role that God played in Wesley’s educational endeavours. Our exploration will be focused around three principles that Wesley spoke about – accountability, divine help and eternal reward.

As regards accountability we read that Wesley’s belief was that God entrusts children to parents for but a short time during which it is the responsibility of the parents to train them in holiness thereby fitting them to be in right relationship with God both in this world and the next. Wesley spoke of the wonderful news that God has entrusted the care and nurture of children to parents and exhorted them to take the importance of that trust seriously. He underscored this by informing parents that they must realise that God will hold them accountable for this. Therefore they should raise and teach
their children to the best of their ability so that when God calls them to account they will be able to joyfully say they have done all that was required of them.\textsuperscript{151}

Wesley reinforced his views regarding the accountability of teachers to God when speaking of women teachers. In the context of providing parents with advice on what schools to send their children to he advised them that they should send such of their girls whom they could not teach at home, to a woman who realised she was accountable to God for her actions.\textsuperscript{152}

Whilst he did not say so directly it is likely that, in both situations, Wesley had in mind the words of James 3:1

\begin{quote}
Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.\textsuperscript{153}
\end{quote}

Clearly then, whilst he makes this comment in relation to female teachers, we can assume that he also held similar views in respect of male teachers. That is, that they too are accountable to God for all aspects of their involvement in educating children. With that in mind it is plain that Wesley believed that all who are called to educate children are accountable to God for training them in holiness thereby fitting them to be in right relationship with God both in this world and the next.

Turning to the concept of divine help we see that it is here that the pre-eminence of the grace of God is most evident in Wesley’s views on education. For it is here that he provided his hearers with the good news that whilst they are accountable to God for their actions God will not leave them to their own devices. Rather through the grace of God they will receive all they need to fulfil their obligations in respect of educating children.

For instance when talking to parents, and again possibly anticipating a question such as “I don’t know how” or “I don’t have the right words” or similar, Wesley spoke of how God will provide the words and will help the child apply those words. Indeed he went further stating that parents must ask God for help for it is only God who can apply the words of the parent in the hearts and minds of the child. And with God’s help, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, the child will learn quickly.\textsuperscript{153}

Wesley also spoke to those parents who struggle to teach their children with the frequency that is required suggesting that their struggle stems from a lack of sufficient

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., III.15, 84.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., III.8, 82.
love either for their children or for God. Whichever one it is he urged them to humble themselves and ask God to provide them with more love. When they do this and when God responds, as God will, then they will find that it will not be difficult to teach their children with the required frequency.\textsuperscript{154}

Any parent, indeed anyone who has taught children, knows that to succeed requires perseverance. When children are slow to learn or are boisterous or disobedient, as some will be, Wesley warned that the temptation will be to say that teaching them is too difficult and to want to give up. Similarly he observed that those who choose to follow his pedagogy will face opposition and will find that obstacles will be placed in their way for they will be following a course of action which is different from that of their peers. He informed his hearers that the only way that they will gain the strength to persevere is to call upon and use all the grace, courage and wisdom which God willingly gives.\textsuperscript{155} These were not just idle words from Wesley for he followed his own advice recognising that in order to provide children with a comprehensive education at Kingswood School he and the staff he employed had to rely on God’s assistance.\textsuperscript{156}

All this effort will bring its reward Wesley reminded his hearers as he encouraged them that some will see the fruit of their labours. These will have the pleasure of seeing those they started on the right path toward holiness continue along it in their adult lives. Others he forewarned that they may not see this happen and encouraged them not to get despondent and assume they have laboured in vain. Rather he urged them to take comfort from the fact that what they have sown will probably bear fruit though they may never see it. Either way, and indeed even if their labours prove to be in vain and their child makes “shipwreck of the faith”\textsuperscript{157} their reward will come from God, if not in this world then in the next. That is they will receive their eternal reward. In this way he appealed to their sense that this promise of God is sufficient incentive to persevere in their responsibility for training children in holiness and thereby fitting them to be in right relationship with God, both in this world and the next.\textsuperscript{158}

It is clear that, as would be expected given the primacy of God in Wesley’s theology, God featured prominently in his views on education and in his implementation

\textsuperscript{154}Ibid., III.9, 82.
\textsuperscript{155}Ibid., III.10, 82-83; III.18, 85-86.
\textsuperscript{156}Wesley, “A Short Account of Kingswood School,” para. 1, 283; “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” para. 11, 293.
\textsuperscript{157}Wesley, “A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children,” para. 3, 475.
of them. This is true not least because the aim of education as he saw it is to empower and enable the child to be restored to the state of perfection that humanity enjoyed when God created human beings as part of creation. In addition the importance Wesley believed God places on the education of children is seen in his recognition that those who teach children are accountable to God for their actions, that God will enable and empower them for the task and that God will reward their efforts.

**Education for Restoration to Perfection**

Our examination of Wesley’s views on education and his implementation of those views shows them to be consonant with how he saw children in his theology. In particular we recall that in the previous chapter we concluded that Wesley believed children could be glorified and that it was part of his mission in life to do all that he could to ensure that they were given every opportunity to be so. Education was very much part of his doing all he could, to give children that opportunity. This is true not least because the aim of education, for Wesley, was to empower and enable children to be restored to the state of perfection that humanity enjoyed when God created human beings as part of creation. Through education Wesley sought to train children in wisdom and holiness with God's help and in so doing instil in them the principles of Christianity. Having achieved this in the life of a child, and hence having met the aim of education as he saw it, not only would the child be a “rational, scriptural [Christian]” but it would also be empowered to live a life characterised by holiness being one where the child lived out the two greatest commandments prior to glorification.

All of Wesley’s views regarding the education of children emanated from, and were oriented towards, achieving this goal. Likewise every action he took to implement his views was taken with the sole purpose of enabling and empowering children to be glorified.

For this reason he took actions designed to minimise corruptive influences and any material distractions which would divert the children from their education. These included siting his schools away from main centres and restricting the admission of students to those who were seeking after God or whose parents desired them to have a right relationship with God.

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159 Wesley, “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” para. 11, 293.
This is also why the implementation of his educational views included actions designed to maximise the chances of children, becoming and remaining, Christian. Actions taken with this intention in mind included the hiring of teachers whose sole motivation for teaching was to glorify God, the mandating of the use of a curriculum designed to prepare children to live in both this world and the next, and the use of only those textbooks which promoted Christian values and morality. Of particular significance here was his requirement that children be taught as soon as they are able to reason as it reflects his belief that even very young children could have faith.\textsuperscript{161} Therefore the younger the child’s education begins the greater the chances of it becoming, and remaining, Christian, in Wesley’s view.

The question we have been attempting to answer is whether, and if so how, Wesley applied his theological convictions regarding children in his work in education. We now have our answer being that it was his theological convictions regarding children which informed his educational endeavours with respect to the education of children.

Having seen that children were clearly evident in each of the eight areas of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions being his doctrines of God, Christology, Pneumatology, prevenient grace, justification, regeneration, sanctification and glorification, and having seen that his theological convictions in these areas informed his educational endeavours, there is sufficient mandate for us to consider whether his theological views regarding children can teach us anything for ministering to children in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. It is to this question that we now turn in the final chapter of this thesis.

Concluding Reflections and Potential Applications

Jesus called a little child to him and put the child among them. Then he said, “I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven.”

In child theology the child and children are placed in the midst of our theological discussions and through them we shed new light on theology, theological doctrines and ecclesial practices. This thesis has achieved this by considering the theology and work of John Wesley. We have found that whilst he is unlikely to have thought in terms of child theology nevertheless children had a special place in his theology, as well as in his heart.

This was the first of the two major aims of this work. That is we sought to identify whether, and if so how, children were present in the theology of John Wesley.

We have found that they were. Our examination of each of the eight areas of Wesley’s doctrinal convictions revealed that children were evident in each. That is, there was unmistakable evidence from Wesley’s writings that he saw children in his theology. We also discovered that Wesley undertook something akin to child theology when, for instance, he allowed his encounters with very young children, whom he was convinced had been divinely regenerated without any human interaction, to inform his theology. In this instance it resulted in his statement that

... no infant ever was, or ever will be, “sent to hell for the guilt of Adam’s sin;” seeing it is cancelled by the righteousness of Christ, as soon as they are sent into the world.

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1 Matt 18:2-3.
Our consideration of Wesley’s educational efforts revealed that every action he took to implement his views on education was taken with the sole purpose of enabling and empowering children to be glorified. So it was that Wesley used education as part of his life’s mission to do everything he could to ensure that all people were given every opportunity to be in right relationship with God for eternity. As such it provides us with an excellent example of how our theological understandings of children⁴ can play a vital role in the wider community by informing the wider academic and public discussion on, and around, children.⁵

**Lessons for the Twenty-first Century**

The second major aim of this thesis was to identify lessons from Wesley which may be useful for those called to children’s ministry in the twenty-first century. It is to this which we now turn. As we do so we recognise that his recognition that God works with children as children and not as “little adults” provides the basis for the most important of the many lessons this practical theologian teaches us. We will discuss that lesson later but for now note that with Wesley as a “theological mentor”⁶ we have the advantage of being able to learn from both his theology and his practical implementation of that theology.

For instance Wesley provides us with a planning and implementation framework which, at least in most respects, could serve as a model for planning and implementing any facet of children’s ministry. We can also learn from the actions that he took particularly in implementing his educational views. We could for instance discuss his lack of understanding of the value of play in childhood. There is also value in considering his willingness to wait for the right people rather than rushing to appoint someone for the sake of getting things happening. Lastly, his willingness to tie his expectations as regards education into the wider requirements he placed on members of the Methodist movement, and in particular those he placed on his preachers, provides further valuable lessons for us.

There are also lessons of character. By this I mean that, throughout the development and implementation of his educational views, Wesley displayed qualities which included strength of character, perseverance, authenticity, initiative, a willingness

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to do what had to be done, loyalty to his ideals and in particular to his theology, and above all a total reliance on God. Each of these could be outlined in considerable detail as his character traits would serve as a model for how we should act in the twenty-first century. Wesley would possibly consider this appropriate, given his requirement that parents, preachers, and teachers model good Christian behaviour as an example for children to follow.

Furthermore he has much to teach us about working with God in the *missio Dei* in the world. In particular we can learn from his belief that “whenever the Holy Ghost teaches, there is no delay in learning.” This has, I believe, salutary lessons for how our theology impacts the development and nurture of children’s faith in the twenty-first century.

No doubt others will be able to identify additional lessons which emerge from this brief contemplation of firstly Wesley’s theology, secondly the place of children in that theology and finally how his educational endeavours were informed by his view of children in his theology. If that is the case then another of the aims of this thesis will have been achieved.

Each of these lessons can also be thought about from a number of perspectives. We could, for example, focus on the lessons as they are applicable to that part of the body of Christ which traces its ancestry, so to speak, to the ministry of John Wesley. At the other end of the continuum we could consider these lessons from the perspective of the individual. In between there are ministry, local church, national church, international church and other perspectives which could, and should, be focused on.

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In order to do so, that is consider all the possible lessons which Wesley can teach us from all perspectives, would however require a volume of work which is not feasible within the parameters of this thesis. As such they must wait for another time.

In order to provide some insight however, into how it is possible to learn from Wesley in doing ministry in the twenty-first century, I will focus on six of the lessons we can learn. In doing so I will develop them with those involved in children’s ministry, whether as a Children’s Ministry Leader, Children’s Ministry worker, local church Pastor or local church leader, in mind. These six lessons have been selected as they have, I suggest, special significance for children’s ministry in the twenty-first century as it seeks to define its role within the wider mission of the church, being that of fulfilling the great commission.\(^9\) They are also of importance as the church seeks to determine the nature of the ministry God requires of it in respect of children today. Most importantly, I believe they are significant for the twenty-first century church to learn as it decides what its role is in the nurture of children’s faith.

With that said I must declare here that, with Wesley, I believe God requires that the church train children in holiness thereby fitting them to be in right relationship with God, both in this world and the next. Therefore, whilst it is impractical to consider these lessons in any great depth the detail provided here is, I believe, sufficient to enable the church, and in particular those called to be involved in children’s ministry, to consider and adapt them for their own situation. Having done so it is my hope that they will feel better equipped and empowered to fulfil the trust that God has placed in them to train children in holiness as Wesley defined it.

There is one final comment that I need to make before proceeding to outline these lessons. That is that I deliberately take a very emphatic approach in discussing them. I make no apology for that as I believe that if we are to follow in Wesley’s footsteps and train children in holiness as Wesley defined it (and I believe that we should) then it is imperative that we learn and apply these lessons. It is not a case that we “should” or “can” learn them, I believe we “must” learn them if God’s purposes for children are to be achieved in the twenty-first century and beyond.

**Lesson One: Seek Help**

The first lesson is one which happens not just at the beginning but throughout the whole process including review, or at least it should do. In Wesley’s case we know that

he sought help, and was prepared to learn, from others. We know, for instance that he spoke with a number of sensible men as he considered the state of eighteenth century education.\(^\text{10}\) Wesley was also heavily influenced by educational thinkers of his time and those who had gone before including his mother,\(^\text{11}\) Comenius,\(^\text{12}\) Locke,\(^\text{13}\) and Law\(^\text{14}\) for it was from these that he synthesised his ideas.

There was however one source of help which overrode all others. That source being God, who we saw, was pre-eminent in Wesley’s theology. It began, ended and was permeated throughout with the grace of God, emanating from the love of God. In response to that love Wesley required that all whom God calls, and entrusts with the responsibility to minister to children, must rely on God to be empowered for the task, must seek God’s help and guidance, and must remain accountable to God.

That call is as relevant in the twenty-first century as it was when Wesley made it over two hundred years ago. Likewise his example of seeking help, and learning from others is one that all involved in children’s ministry today would do well to follow.

**Lesson Two: Know and Apply Your Overall Theology**

What is also as applicable today as it was in the eighteenth century is how Wesley’s wider theology informed his view of children within that theology which in turn enlightened his educational endeavours as they related to children. Those called to minister to children must follow his example and ensure that their theology also informs their practice.

Yet it is more than just allowing their theology to inform their practice. Wesley did not hold his theological views regarding children in isolation and nor must those involved in children’s ministry. If we are to follow Wesley’s example the theological views applied in any children’s ministry must be in accord with those of the parent body. For example, the theological viewpoint of the local church must inform the

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\(^{11}\) See, for example, V.H.H. Green, *John Wesley* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1964), 11.


\(^{14}\) Ibid., 34.
theological views regarding children which in turn will be played out in the practical ministry to children in that setting.

Before we proceed to lesson three there is one further aspect of the development of theology which is worth learning from Wesley. Like him those involved in children’s ministry (indeed all Christians for that matter) would do well to base their theology on Scripture. At the same time they should, as he did, allow experience to inform and refine their theology and in so doing actively engage in child theology.

Lesson Three: Know Your Goal

It is here that we learn from how Wesley ensured that the goal of education as he saw it informed his educational views and dictated their implementation. That is to say, knowing the goal enabled him to decide what needed to be done and how it needed to be done. With this goal clearly in mind he could, and did, review progress towards its achievement, and he could hold others accountable for their actions having first ensured they were aware of the goal. Knowing the goal he was able to say, near the end of his life, that it was generally being achieved.16

Furthermore, with his goal clear in his mind, Wesley was able to take those actions that would maximise the chances of success. In addition he was able to ensure that actions which could thwart his attempts to achieve the aim of education were avoided. For instance, having the goal clearly in mind enabled him to be resolute in waiting to find those teachers who possessed the required level of spirituality and the right motives rather than rushing to employ some who did not.17

The same is true in the twenty-first century. Those called to ministry to children need to know the goal they are trying to reach if they are to achieve it having put in place the right activities, personnel and methodology. This is particularly the case where the availability of resources, both personnel and monetary, is limited or restricted. It is even more important if the aim is seen to be similar to that Wesley’s, that is, fitting children to be in right relationship with God both in this world and the next.

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17 Wesley, “A Plain Account of Kingswood School,” para. 9, 292.
With this as the goal of ministry to children those in children's ministry must be focused in ensuring that the actions taken contribute positively to, and thereby maximise the chances of, its attainment. For example, doing as Wesley did and waiting to find ministry workers with the required level of spirituality and the right motives rather than rushing in to use those who happen to be available or, worse still, those who need to be coerced to work with God in his ministry to children.

**Lesson Four: Do not be Selfish**

Whilst Kingswood School was a lifelong interest\(^{18}\) Wesley did not confine his interest in education to it alone. He endorsed and supported the work of others,\(^{19}\) both in England and on the mission field. As early as the 1720's, when he himself was in his twenty's, he financially supported other schools.\(^{20}\) That said the how of what he did in looking beyond his own work is not as important as the fact that he did. In this, was he modelling part of what it meant to him to live a holy life? Whether consciously, or unconsciously, it is safe to say he was.

With this last comment in mind all those involved in children’s ministry, who believe also that they are called to love God and love their neighbour, would do well to follow Wesley’s example and support the work of others. Moreover as Christians they should be, for this is what Christ calls all Christians to do.\(^ {21}\)

**Lesson Five: Be Prepared for Criticism and Opposition**

To some who heed God’s call to ministry with children this is likely to be a shock. That is to say, to some people, the mere idea that others would criticise or oppose one for doing God’s work is a foreign concept. Unfortunately that is a naïve position to hold. Rather, all called to this ministry should be prepared to face the inevitable criticism and opposition that will arise. Here again we can learn from Wesley as he advised those who followed his educational advice that they would face opposition.\(^ {22}\)

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\(^{18}\)Green, *John Wesley*, 135.

\(^{19}\)For example, his endorsement of the schools run by Christian women, in Highgate, Deptford, Chester and near the towns of Bristol and Leeds. Wesley, “Sermon 94, ”On Family Religion”, III.15, 84.


\(^{22}\)Wesley, “Sermon 94, ”On Family Religion”, III.18, 85-86.
Perhaps the episode from which we can learn the most in this respect is that of the critic to which he responds in *A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children*. It is here that we see that Wesley took time to carefully consider the criticism made against him. That is he did not respond immediately. Rather he considered it in the light of the evidence available to him and took time to formulate a response. In doing so he reviewed what had been said against him and gave credit where a valid point had been made. He then proceeded to defend his view in a confident manner.

**Lesson Six: Do Not Limit God**

I have left what I believe is the most important lesson to last. Without accepting, and more importantly, implementing what Wesley teaches here everything else that is put in place such as the right activities, personnel and methodology is done in vain. This lesson must be fundamental to how we view ministry to children.

We have seen how Wesley believed that children at a very young age could be glorified. Accepting the sovereignty of God, and his unlimited ability to choose what to do, as well as where and when to move in the hearts and minds of people, Wesley never presumed to place any limits on what God could, or would choose to, do. He fully accepted justification at birth and whilst that doctrine embodies a concept that many, including me, will find difficult to come to grips with, nevertheless it must be accepted as being in accordance with his views on the sovereignty of God.

That said even if we cannot accept this doctrine Wesley provides sufficient evidence that when God, through the Holy Spirit, chooses to teach there is indeed no delay in learning. That evidence is the many examples of very young children who were clearly sanctified and who would, at the final judgement, be glorified and live in right relationship with God forever.

The key lesson, that those called by God to be involved in children’s ministry must learn from how Wesley saw children in his theology therefore, is do not place any limits on God. On the contrary, we must accept that God can, and does, move in the hearts and minds of whomever he chooses at whatever age he chooses. Accordingly we have no option but to believe that God can choose to work in the hearts and minds of very young children. Nor do we have any other option than to accept as true that children

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can have a justifying faith, can be born again and can, as a consequence, live lives of holiness loving God and their neighbour.

Therefore those called to be involved in children’s ministry, if they are to follow Wesley’s example, must be ready to work with God as an agent of God’s prevenient grace as God draws children into right relationship with himself. They must be ready, as Wesley was, to disciple those children God entrusts to them in a life of holiness.

In learning this lesson from Wesley those involved in children’s ministry accept that, contra Tranter, this is not dispensing with childhood, but joining God in doing as he did when he placed a child in the midst of the disciples saying

I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven.²⁴

**Priority**

In outlining my motivation for undertaking this research I observed that one of the questions which provided that motivation is - would John Wesley be supportive of bringing lost children into the fold and into the fullness of the stature of Christ in the twenty-first century? This thesis has shown that not only would he be supportive of this happening, he would require that it be focused upon and accorded the highest level of priority and urgency, realising as he did that revival depends upon it.²⁵

The twenty-first century church would do well to follow Wesley’s example and call by placing the highest priority, and hence employing its best resources, on bringing lost children into the fold and into the fullness of the stature of Christ. Then we would see a revival that would more than rival that of the eighteenth century – one such that we have never seen the likes of before.

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²⁴ Matt 18:3 (NLT).
B I B L I O G R A P H Y


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