

John Wesley and Education
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INTRODUCTION

The question I will explore in this paper is a practical one: "Is there anything in John Wesley's understanding of education that might inform the United Methodist Church in a time when there is serious discussion about the nature and practice of Christian education?"

The question is an attempt to take seriously the dimension of tradition in the quadrilateral. It is not an attempt to transfer and eighteenth-century experience into the twentieth century. The cultural context is much too different for such a transference to take place. Rather, the question is whether or not biblical, theological, or educational insights might inform or stimulate reflection.

John Wesley had a significant interest in and concern for education. At the Methodist Conference in 1744 Wesley posed three questions: "What do we teach? How do we teach? What do we do?" Wesley printed and distributed tracts. He urged that persons read and study the Bible and a broad range of other books. He sold books in paperback so more persons could afford to purchase them. His sermons were instructional. He started a school for boys at Kingswood. He actively supported the fledgling Sunday School movement.

For the purposes of this paper I will limit my exploration to Wesley's attitude towards the educational institutions of his day, the Kingswood School, Wesley's relationship to the Sunday School movement, and the educative function of the family.

The Kingswood School was located about three miles from Bristol.

"It was quite private, remote from all high roads....I built the house, capable of maintaining fifty children besides masters and servants...."¹

When the school opened in 1748 there were 50 boys between the ages of 6-12 as boarders. Some of the boys were sons of Methodist lay preachers and some were boys from poor families.

Sunday Schools were not originally part of the Methodist movement nor part of Wesley's plan. The first mention of a Sunday School is a reference to Hannah Bell who apparently began a Sunday School in 1769, 14 years before Robert Raikes began his in Gloucester. In 1770 she wrote to Wesley, "The children meet twice a week, every Sunday and Monday. They are a wild little company, but some seem willing to be instructed. I labor among them, earnestly desiring to promote the interest of the Church of Christ."² While the Sunday Schools were "undenominational," they were often led by Methodists. Wesley encouraged the development and growth of the new movement.

Wesley's concern for the educative role of the family is seen in two sermons, probably preached in 1783: "On Family Religion" and "On the Education of Children." These three resources (Kingswood, the Sunday School, and the two sermons) provide some insight to Wesley's understanding of education.

It is important to note that when we speak of education in relationship to Wesley we are speaking about classical education as well as religious education. We cannot look at Wesley through the more restrictive lens of Christian education.

I

In this paper I will limit my comments to five dimensions of Wesley's understanding of education.

- A. First of all, John Wesley believed that classical study and religious instruction should go together.

He was critical of contemporary education, methods, and teachers. His concern ranged from the behavior of children and their negative influence on one another to the choice of subjects and the order in which they were taught to the lack of religion among the schoolmasters.³

Wesley said he looked for schools without these shortcomings. Finding none he reflects, "A thought came into my mind of setting up a school myself."⁴

Furthermore, many children of the poor did not have the opportunity to attend school. If wealthier parents did not like what was happening in the schools they simply secured tutors in their homes for their children.

Wesley's design was to train children, especially the poor, in every branch of useful learning and to provide religious training.

"Our first point was to answer the design of Christian education by forming their minds, through the help of God, to wisdom and holiness, by instilling the principles of true religion, speculative and practical, and training them up in the ancient way, that they might be rational scriptural Christians."⁵

The aim of education for Wesley was ultimately a religious one.

"For what end do you send your children to school? 'Why, that they may be fit to live in the world.' In which world do you mean? This or the next? Perhaps you thought of this world only; and had forgot that there is a world to come--yea, and one that will last forever!"⁶

And in his sermon on "The Education of Children," Wesley said, "The grand end of education is to cure the general diseases of human nature" (which he earlier listed as atheism, self-will, pride, love of the world, anger, lying and acts of injustice).⁷

In this view of education Wesley seems to be saying that if a child is properly educated they might make a commitment to Christ, not so much in terms of a conversion as in terms of affirmation. That is, education helps children come to a full consciousness of God's prevenient grace so they can affirm it and accept it for themselves.

Initially, Kingswood was "made up of eight classes with each class having a prescribed curriculum of reading, writing, mathematics, languages, sciences, history, geography, music and religion. Religious studies included certain books of the Bible and a variety of books related to the Christian faith."⁸

Charles Wesley captured the vision John had for Kingswood in a hymn he wrote for the opening of the school in 1748:

"Unite the pair, so long disjoined, knowledge and vital piety."⁹

The concern to blend knowledge and vital piety is also seen in John's support for and encouragement of the Sunday School movement. It is important to understand that Sunday School is not the one-hour experience with which most of us are familiar today. It usually met all day on Sunday so that it did not interfere with the working schedule of children. One picture of the work of the Sunday School emerges in the tract on "The Life and Death of Mr. Fletcher," where there is the description of students being taught to read and write and the principles of religion in order "to plant useful knowledge in the minds and piety in the hearts of uneducated children."¹⁰

Wesley's warm approval of the Sunday School can be seen in his Journal entries. When a Sunday School was established in Chester he wrote:

"It seems that these will be one great means of reviving religion throughout the nation."¹¹

Following a visit to the Bingley Church he noted,

"Before the service I slipped into the Sunday School. Two-hundred-forty children are taught there every Sunday by several masters. So many children in one parish are restrained from open sin and taught good manners as well as to read the Bible. I find these schools springing up wherever I go. Perhaps God may have a deeper end than we know of. Who knows but some of these schools may become nurseries for Christians."¹²

So Wesley saw two institutions begin to address his concern about education in his day and to live towards his aim of uniting knowledge and vital piety.

At Kingswood the "uniting" took on an unusual form. In May, 1768 Wesley received a letter from the headmaster, James Hindmarsh. The letter described in detail, extreme emotionalism and all, a religious revival among the boys. Hindmarsh concluded the letter by saying,

"This is the day we have wished for so long--the day you had in view which made you go through so much."¹³

The Journal contains a description of another revival in September, 1770, with vivid details of the "enthusiasms" of the boys.¹⁴

There is a hint that Wesley may have been concerned about the emotional dimensions of the experiences and whether or not the experiences would last. He talked with the older children one on one, "advising them as each had need."¹⁵ And later, when the boys had been confessing their sin and praying he "instructed them on the meaning of the Lord's Prayer."¹⁶

Wesley's worst fears about his overall support for the revivals is seen in a 1771 Journal entry referring to the 1770 revival:

"What is become of the wonderful work of grace which God wrought in them last September? Is it gone? Is it lost? It is vanished away! There is scarce any trace of it remaining! Then we must begin again; and in due time we shall reap if we faint not."¹⁷

Wesley believed that classical study and religious instruction should be together because persons are not simply being prepared to live effectively in the temporal world; persons are being prepared for God's Kingdom, which lasts forever.

- B. Second, John Wesley's concern for education extended beyond the bounds of the church and societies. He was concerned about education of the public, especially the poor.

Wesley's vision for Kingswood is that in the usual hours of the day poorer children would be taught to read, write, and cast accounts, but more especially "to know God and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent."¹⁸ In addition, older people might be educated too, but they should not mix with children:

"Expect some of the scholars to be grey-headed, taught either in the early morning or late at night so their work might not be hindered."¹⁹

I have not been able to find further references about the education of adults so I do not know if that part of his vision was realized.

Another part of his vision for Kingswood was to develop it into a college so youth might begin and end their education in the same place. Originally, he expected graduates of Kingswood to enter Oxford or Cambridge or a university of their choice. But six Kingswood students were expelled from Oxford and one was refused admittance. Thus his vision for Kingswood expanded: "Blessed be God, I can do all the business which I have in hand without them."²⁰ That part of his vision was not reached in his lifetime.

The work at Kingswood and the other schools that followed, including schools for girls, constituted an alternative school system for the

public. Through the work done in developing these schools, Wesley made an important contribution towards a universal system of education that later developed in England.²¹

The Sunday School movement had a similar focus into the community. The current expression of the Sunday School in North America tends to be for the members of a congregation. The leaders of the Sunday School movement in Wesley's day purposed to teach the children of the community to read and write as well as to instruct them in the Christian faith.

While the focus of education at Kingswood and the Sunday School was into community, the purpose of such education was probably not intended to help persons escape from the structures of poverty. Wesley probably did not see learning as "a ticket to preferment or privilege but as a way to promote holiness."²² This attitude is seen in his sermon, "On Family Religion." Wesley says,

"I have been shocked above measure in observing how little this is attended to (laying up treasures in heaven), even by pious parents! Even these consider only how he may get the most money, not how he may get holiness!...Do not regard if your son gets less money, provided he gets more holiness. It is enough, though he has less of earthly goods, if he secures the possession of heaven."²³

Teaching the "three R's" in Sunday School was even seen as necessary preparation for the study of the Bible.²⁴

To summarize, the aim of education for Wesley was a religious one. His concern was to help persons live more faithfully and fully whatever their economic condition was.

- C. Third, John Wesley, ever the pragmatist, utilized a variety of educational theories and experiences upon which to build Kingswood.

"About forty years ago, one or two tracts upon education fell into my hands, which led me to consider the methods pursued in that great school wherein I had been educated....I spent many thoughts on this subject...."²⁵

In his "Plain Account of Kingswood School," Wesley refers to Milton's "Treatise on Education."²⁶ Others propose that Loche's tract on education may have been utilized by Wesley too, but I have not been able to discover that in the Wesley material I read. In addition, Wesley visited "some of the most celebrated schools in Holland and Germany."²⁷

One needs to be careful not to stress too much the effect of a clearly thought out educational theory upon which the Kingswood experience was built. But there are some theoretical influences. For example, it is quite possible that Wesley viewed children as little adults and had them taught accordingly. It was a common view of his day. Further, he was concerned about the kind of life teachers lived and the influence they had on children. Finally, Wesley was committed to blending

knowledge and experience at Kingswood. In short, Wesley was pragmatic. If it worked he used it to inform his work at Kingswood.

However, it is my sense that Wesley's ultimate goals and purposes were determined using biblical and theological sources.

- D. Fourth, Wesley reminds us that persons, including children, are "bent to sin."

In the sermon, "On the Education of Children," Wesley implies that children are sinful adults in all but age, that you need to have disciplined rules for immature minds, and that you need to "break the wills" of children in order to save their souls.²⁸ While breaking the wills of children may not be a view we would hold, it was probably a fairly typical view in the eighteenth century. To "break the will" was not meant to break a person as much as it meant to learn submission to authority and to gain self-discipline.

Kingswood was organized with discipline and strictness in mind. The rules were to be strictly followed, by both masters and scholars.

There were six general rules at Kingswood developed to carry out Wesley's educational theories. The rules covered the daily schedule which included rising at 4:00 a.m., work and study schedule (there was not to be any time for play. "He that plays when he is a child will play when he is a man."), details were given about diet for the week,²⁹ Sunday schedule, what was taught and when, and sleeping arrangements. One of the main features of the rules was to keep the children under control.

Now, it is one thing to set strict rules. It is quite another to have them followed. The Journal is filled with references to problems.

"I rode to Kingswood concerned to find that several of the rules had been habitually neglected. It is necessary to lessen the family, suffering none to remain therein who were not clearly satisfied with them and determined to observe them all."³⁰

"I talked at large with the masters of Kingswood School concerning the children and the management. They agreed that one of the boy students labored to corrupt the rest. I would not suffer him to stay any longer under the roof, but sent him home that very hour."³¹

And then the strongest word of all:

"I told my whole mind to the masters and servants, and spoke to the children in a far stronger manner than I ever did before. I will kill or cure. I will have one or the other--a Christian school, or none at all."³²

The Journal reflects times when things went well at Kingswood too.

"I had much comfort among the children in Kingswood, finding several of them that really feared God."³³

"I rode to Kingswood and rejoiced over the school which is at length what I have so long wished it to be--a blessing to all that are therein and an honor to the whole body of Methodists."³⁴

However, one comment is revealing about what too much strictness might do to children:

"I spent some time with the children at Kingswood. They are all in health; they behaved well; they learn well; but alas! (two or three excepted), there is no life in them."³⁵

Wesley was concerned about the behavior of the children of his day. They lacked discipline and were involved in the many vices of the day. He believed that the times called for intellectual, moral, and religious discipline. That belief guided life at Kingswood.

- E. Fifth, Wesley was aware of the powerful influence of the family on children and their faith experiences and religious education, probably remembering the time spent with his mother and the influence of his father who was well versed in the classics.

Parents could be a negative influence. In his sermon, "On Family Religion," he states that the "wickedness" of children is related to the "fault or neglect of their parents."³⁶ Negative family influence concerned him so much in relationship to Kingswood School that he kept parents and children separated. Parents had to agree "that they will not take him from school, no, not for a day, till they take him for good and all."³⁷ This rule was reasonable to Wesley in that children could "unlearn as much in one week as they have learned in several."³⁸

But not all children were at Kingswood! Wesley had a concern for the education of children, not only for their own spiritual well-being but for the ongoing vitality of the Methodist revival.³⁹ He believed the family played a key role in both.

He preached a series of sermons on "family religion." In the sermon, "On Family Religion," he provides guidelines for educating children:

"Instruct them early in the morning. Speak to them plainly. Observe the few ideas they have and graft what you say upon them. Teach them frequently. Persevere."⁴⁰

In the sermon, "On the Education of Children," Wesley continues to provide guidelines for parents. While I do not intend to relate that sermon in detail I find his guideline in dealing with the atheism of children intriguing with contemporary application. He suggests that parents feed the atheism of their children when they talk about daily events in terms of chance, good or ill fortune.

"What can be done to cure it (atheism)? From the first dawn of reason continually inculcate, 'God is in this and every place. God made you, and me, and the earth, and the sun, and the moon, and everything....As God made the world, so God governs the world, and everything in it. Not so much as a sparrow falls to the ground without the will of God.'"⁴¹

In the education of children parents play a key and vital role, both in what they teach and how they live.

I am interested in your discussion and reflection on these five dimensions of education out of Wesley's experience.

But as one who must practice ministry I am interested in what way, if any, these five dimensions might inform our discussions on Christian education in the United Methodist Church.

I would like to propose several possibilities. We have explored five dimensions of education out of Wesley's experience.

But as one who must practice educational ministry I am interested in exploring in what way, if any, do these traditions inform our discussions on Christian education in the United Methodist Church.

I would like to propose several possibilities and invite your response as a reader of this paper.

II

The question I proposed to explore at the beginning of the paper was, "Is there anything in John Wesley's understanding of education that might inform the United Methodist Church in a time when we are examining our understanding and practice of Christian education?"

I share these preliminary conclusions:

- A. First, teaching will be seen as a fundamental ministry of the church. It is a fundamental ministry because of the United Methodist understanding of grace.

Because of God's prevenient grace we teach so children and persons who have never heard the story of God's grace will come to understand that God is the Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of life.

Christian education, in this sense, will not be seen as a ministry "for members only." There are large numbers of persons in the world, nearly everywhere the United Methodist Church is in ministry, who do not know anything or very little about the Christian faith. Is it time for us to concern ourselves more intentionally with "Christian apologetics"?

Because of our belief in God's justifying grace, we teach in order that persons can make informed decisions about the faith and make a commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. For some persons that may mean personal affirmation about what they already experienced in bap-

tism. For others, it may mean conversion. It is time to explore more fully the relationship between evangelism and Christian education.

Because of our belief in God's sanctifying grace, we teach in order that persons might be formed more closely into the image of Jesus. Christian education will have a strong formational dimension to it as well as informational. We will teach persons to pray as well as teach them a theology of prayer. We will teach persons to read and study the Bible as well as teach them information about the Bible. We will help persons be in mission as well as teach them about mission.

- B. Second, biblical and theological understandings will determine the basic aims and purposes of Christian education. The preceding statement is one attempt to begin to live into that conviction.

We will be informed, as was Wesley, by a variety of other disciplines. In our time that will be educational, personality and developmental theories.

The key words are "determined by" and "informed by." The issue for me is where we find the primary source of understanding for our task. For Wesley it was biblical and theological. It should be no less for us.

- C. Third, if the above statement is true, then we will re-examine educational theories in terms of their views of persons. My experience is that many of us have an overly optimistic view of persons. Have we taken seriously enough the view that persons are "bent towards sin"?

Further, while we may be uncomfortable speaking about "breaking the wills" of children, is there not a need for persons to develop a sense of self-discipline and obedience to God without which there is no freedom?

- D. Fourth, we will find ways to work more closely with families and in all of their varied expressions in our churches and communities. Parents will be supported, encouraged, and trained in their parenting role and in their responsibilities and opportunities to share their faith.

Conclusion

A more extensive study of John Wesley would no doubt lead to the discovery of more contributions to a discussion of education.

There are at least two other areas that I have identified that might benefit from further exploration.

- 1) How might Wesley's view of sanctification inform faith development theory? James Fowler has used faith development theory as a lens through which to view and reflect upon the faith experiences of John Wesley. What insights might we gain for education if we used Wesley's understanding of growth and development in the faith to examine faith development theory?

- 2) Is there a "core of beliefs" or are there "essentials of the faith" in Wesley that might be important to identify to end some of the confusion about what United Methodists believe in our time? Would it be fruitful to explore that issue, including possible implications for curriculum, to the end that there would be fewer United Methodists who say, "I don't know what I believe!" Or worse yet, "I am a Methodist and I can believe anything I want!"

Footnotes:

- 1 Works (Jackson), 13:292.
- 2 Journal (Curnock), 5:104.
- 3 Works, 13:290-291.
- 4 Ibid., 13:292.
- 5 Ibid., 13:293.
- 6 Sermon 94, "On Family Religion," 3:342 (Outler).
- 7 Sermon 95, "On the Education of Children," 3:352.
- 8 Works, 13:283ff.
- 9 Heitzenrater, Richard, The Illusive Mr. Wesley.
- 10 Works, 11:336.
- 11 Journal, 7:236.
- 12 Ibid., 7:377.
- 13 Journal, 5:260.
- 14 Ibid., 5:388-390.
- 15 Ibid., 5:485.
- 16 Ibid., 5:524-26.
- 17 Ibid., 5:430.
- 18 Ibid., 2:458.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Works, 13:296ff.
- 21 Davies, Rupert E., Methodism, p. 152.
- 22 Heitzenrater, Op. Cit.
- 23 Sermon 94 (Outler), 3:344.
- 24 Davies, p. 152.
- 25 Works, 13:289.
- 26 Ibid., 13:296.
- 27 Ibid., 13:289.
- 28 Sermon 95 (Outler), 3:352-354.
- 29 Works, 13:285.
- 30 Journal, 3:423.
- 31 Ibid., 3:457.
- 32 Ibid., 5:159.
- 33 Ibid., 3:540.
- 34 Ibid., 4:247.
- 35 Ibid., 5:149.
- 36 Sermon 94, 3:335.
- 37 Works, 13:293.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Sermon 94, 3:335.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Sermon 95, 3:353.

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