

JOHN WESLEY'S FORMATIVE EXPERIENCES:
FOUNDATIONS FOR HIS EDUCATIONAL MINISTRY PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

John Wesley's life and ministry transformed 18th century England. His proclamation of the gospel of freedom from sin and social liberation revolutionized society. The Methodist movement was marked by structured small groups that helped people grow toward "holiness of heart and life." Wesley's theology was worked out in his ministry, much of which were shaped by his early life experiences. The intent of this article is to explore the formative experiences of Wesley's life and how they shaped his educational ministry perspectives. First, they included the informal influences of his family, especially his mother, Susanna Wesley. The discipline, nurture, and formation of these learning experiences shaped Wesley's view of Christian formation. Second, Wesley's formal education at Charterhouse and Oxford provide the context for Wesley's educational perspective and the development of small groups and spiritual formation. These educational experiences were formative in the development of his spiritual life and the rise of Methodism. Third, Wesley's non-formal learning experiences, including his trip to Georgia, the influence of the Moravians, and his Aldersgate experience, shaped and molded his theological framework and educational practices. These experiences are framed in a holistic educational framework that includes the following aspects of learning: informal, non-formal, and formal. An overview of these formative experiences provides a holistic framework for Wesley's educational perspectives (figure 1).

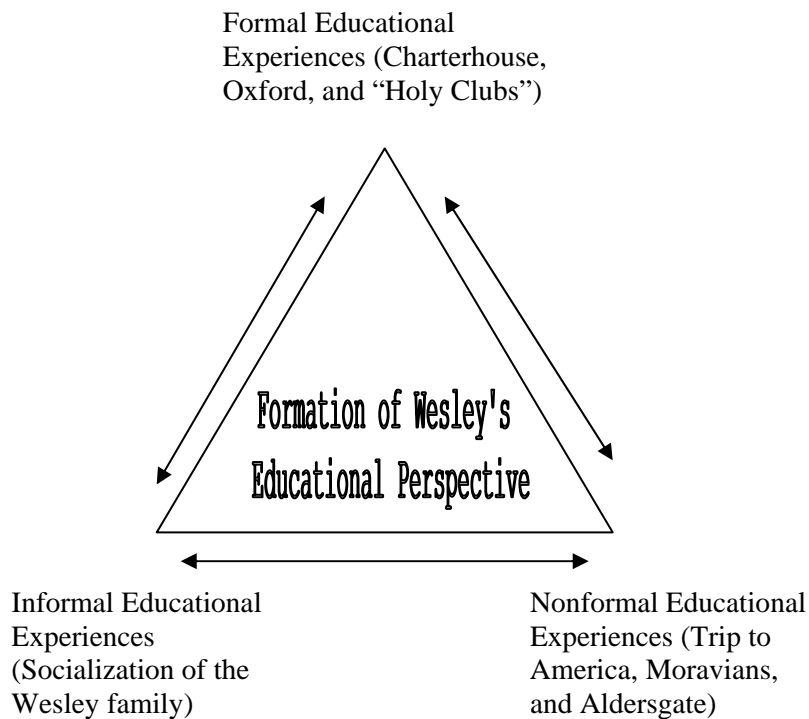


Figure 1. Formation of John Wesley's Educational Perspective

Wesley's Informal Education

John Wesley was born on June 17, 1703. His life spans nearly the entire eighteenth century (1703-1791). His parents were Samuel and Susanna Wesley. The home in which John was born provided much of the impetus of his later educational interests. His father Samuel was an Anglican clergyman and a biblical scholar of considerable renown (Green 1961, 12). Samuel provided an excellent model of scholarship and instructed his children in the rudiments of liberal education and classical languages, so that several of the children could read the Greek New Testament before the age of ten (Henderson 1997, 34).

Even though Samuel was a good scholar, he was a poor hand at practical affairs and displayed an overly argumentative temperament. His mismanagement of money resulted in his being placed in debtor's prison for at least a few months and was a continual controversy throughout his life (Collins 1999, 11). The Wesley family was large consisting of nineteen children, of whom John was the fifteenth. Due to the poor medical practices of the day, nine of these children died as infants (Collins 1999, 11).

Much of Wesley's success as an educator can be traced to factors in his own training at home. In later years, when John and his brother Charles had the opportunity to instruct thousands of people in personal spiritual growth, they employed many of the same methods their parents had used (Henderson 1997, 34). Susanna's influence on the Wesley family was impressive. As a strong disciplinarian, she cared for children according to rule and method. She provided the primary education of her children and had a significant influence on the formation of John. Susanna would spend six hours a day at school where instruction was serious and thorough and where loud talking and boisterous playing were strictly forbidden. She refused to send her children to the local schoolmaster, John Holland, because of his notorious incompetence and wickedness (Prince 1926, 104). Susanna looked upon all her children as talents committed to her under trust by God, and although she desired that they should be versed in useful knowledge, it was her principle intention to save their souls.

After the near tragic death of John during the burning of the Epworth Rectory, Susanna made a habit of spending one evening a week with each child separately. She devoted Thursday evening to John, and was especially careful of him, seeing in his miraculous escape from the fire some deep providential meaning (Wesley 1872, 3:32-34). The near-death experience communicated to John and Susanna not only God's superintending providence, but also that the Lord had a noble purpose for John's life (Collins 1999, 14).

Susanna's educational practices were very influential in John Wesley's educational perspective. John Prince states, "He (Wesley) derived more of his convictions concerning the education of children from his cultured and pious mother, Mrs. Susanna Wesley, than from any other source" (1926, 104). During the absences from Epworth she continued family worship and held services Sunday evenings for her children and servants, which neighbors also joined, often packing the house. Susanna prepared literature and books suited for children's needs, finding none that met her severe requirements.

Susanna influenced John's theological foundations of his educational practices. Susanna's theology was to educate children into salvation. She provided nurture and care for John in the midst of a much regimented life. However, many scholars state that Susanna's child-rearing practices were not as severe as John's educational practices. She permitted her children

to play games of chance and skill, and cards, in the Epworth home (Prince 1926, 108). In regard to the balance of child-rearing practices and education of Susanna to her family, Body states,

Mrs. Susanna Wesley presents an example of patient yet firm intelligence, which is almost a complete justification of the home system. But she was an exceptional woman, with ideas on education carefully formulated, and the ten children who survived infancy claimed her untiring attention and industry for many years. (Body 1936, 38)

Susanna's methods of child rearing and education are displayed in *The Way of Education* (Wesley 1872, 3:43-39). *The Way of Education* was a letter written to John at his own request for the details of her method of raising children. It reveals a discipline strict and persistent, but withal calm and unhurried. It shows that Susanna governed by inflexibility, ruled nearly every detail of her children's lives--their physical growth, their play, their study and work, and their piety and devotion (Prince 1926, 114-115).

Susanna's influence cannot be overstated, for she modeled an approach to education that was adopted and practiced by John. Both Samuel and Susanna had strong religious convictions and strong personalities, with earnest and sincere hearts. It was their influence at the Epworth Rectory that instilled an uncanny seriousness in moral and spiritual affairs in many of their children with the good result that all three of their sons, Samuel Jr., John, and Charles, would eventually become priests of the Church of England (Collins 1999, 16).

Another primary influence on John Wesley's educational perspective modeled by Susanna was discipline. Wesley, following his mother, conceived the training of children to be a twofold task. One branch of it is discipline, the other reading (Prince 1936, 115). The disciplinary work is to correct the bias of nature by curing the diseases of nature. It is done chiefly in two ways, the one negative and the other positive. The growth of the disease should not be stimulated; it should not be fed. Also, parents should follow positive methods to root out the diseases and to heal them (Prince 1936, 115). Thus, the parent's task was that of a disciplinary. The religious instruction of children begins before this is accomplished, merging with it and supplementing it. The dawn of conscious religion should be coincident with the dawn of reason. The combination task should begin as early as possible. As Wesley stated,

Scripture, reason, and experience jointly testify that, inasmuch as the corruption of nature is earlier than our instructions can be, we should take all pains and care to counteract this corruption as early as possible (Wesley 1872, 7:459).

Susanna's emphasis on discipline is adapted by John and provides an important aspect to his educational perspective. As discussed above, it stems from their theological conviction of original sin and the need to "Break the will of the child." One of the key tenets of Methodism is clearly evident in the educational philosophy of Susanna Wesley: the management of the human will. Susanna considered the mastery of the child's will to be the decisive factor in character molding (Henderson 1999, 35). As stated above, the emphasis on personal discipline and spiritual submission became the essential component of John Wesley's educational strategy as he applied it, not only to children, but also to the urban masses that crowded into England's industrial centers.

However, life in the Wesley household was not totally oppressive. Susanna and Samuel showed real concern for the spiritual well-being of their children. Samuel influenced his sons through his own devotion to scholarship. Also, Samuel was a dedicated Anglican pastor who

influenced his sons with a high view of the sacraments and the Eucharist. In addition, the Wesley household embraced a number of different styles of devotional literature (Schmidt 1966, 1:63). Wesley was indeed indebted to his family. His childhood offered a strong blend of Puritan devotion and Anglican sacramentalism and churchmanship, all of which influenced Wesley's own educational practice (Monk 1966, 23).

Although John Wesley was the founder of Methodism, Susanna Wesley gave Methodism its methodical nature. She sought to bring every activity, word, and even thoughts and motives into a well-regulated regimen. She passed on to her children the discipline of time management and orderly conduct (Henderson 1997, 38).

Wesley's Formal Education

In eighteenth-century England, many families sent their children to a private boarding school. The formation of Susanna and Samuel were limited to the first ten years of John's life, for then he entered the Charterhouse Boarding School at ten years of age (Wesley 1872, 2:209). Wesley's experiences at the Charterhouse were not always pleasant and influenced his view of childhood education (Mathews 1949, 25). British historian H. F. Mathews states that some of the restrictions at Kingswood may well have come from his own painful experiences at Charterhouse (1949, 25).

After graduating from Charterhouse, Wesley attended Oxford and received his bachelors' degree in 1724 at age of 21 after five years of competent study (Henderson 1997, 40). He demonstrated considerable proficiency in classical studies, but his greatest delight was logic and debate (Wesley 1872, 2:72-73). Wesley was not an exceptionally good student during a bad period of Oxford's educational history, particularly early in his career (Seaborn 1985, 45-51). However, it was at Oxford where Wesley's formal education was most influential. It was a place where Wesley experimented with "practical divinity" and developed an appreciation for both the classics and a wide range of devotional literature. This took place primarily through group formation (Henderson 1997; Blevins 1999; Harper 1983).

After his graduation from Oxford, Wesley began to contemplate ordination in the Church of England and to dedicate his life to the priesthood. His father had encouraged his technical theology with special emphasis on the study of biblical languages and the scholarly preparation that a clergyman might need. On the other hand, Susanna, reflecting her deeply ingrained Puritan training, urged him to give his primary attention to practical experiential divinity (Henderson 1997, 41). However, it was not the advice of his parents that impacted his decision, and young John began to examine his life to determine whether he could attain to such a high calling. It was the influence of Thomas 'a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* (1426), Jeremy Taylor's *The Rule of Exercise of Holy Living* (1650), and *The Rule of Exercise of Holy Dying* (1651), and William Law's *Christian Perfection* (1726), and *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728) that converted Wesley to a disciplined lifestyle. The classics had a profound influence on Wesley's life and thought:

I met with 'a Kempis's 'Christian Pattern.' The nature and extent of inward religion, the religion of the heart, nor appeared to me in a stronger light than ever it had done before. I saw that giving even all my life to God (supposing it is possible to do this, and go not farther) would profit me nothing, unless I gave my heart, yes, all my heart to him. (Wesley 1872, 2:366-67)

For Wesley, this marked a pivotal time in his life, one that would propel him into the future, one that he would never forget. Ken Collins states regarding this experience,

He (Wesley) realized that religion entailed not simply outward exercise and duty, but also the tempers and affections of the heart that it embraced not simply works of mercy, but works of piety as well, and that religion encompassed not merely external exercises but also inward devotion and dedication to God. All this and more Wesley learned as he prepared for ordination. (Collins 1999, 24)

John Wesley was ordained deacon of the Church of England on September 19, 1725 with the blessing of Susanna and Samuel Wesley.

Wesley became a tutor at Oxford after his graduation in 1729. As a Fellow at Lincoln College, he had been appointed to supervise and tutor a group of undergraduates in both academic and spiritual progress (Schmidt 1966, 2:196-197). John gave leadership to a group of undergraduates who were meeting four nights weekly for study of the classics and reading the Greek New Testament. In addition to their classical studies they practiced Bible reading, prayer, fasting, confession, and frequent partaking of the sacrament. In addition, the students served others by visiting the sick, elderly, and imprisoned, and provided clothing and financial aid where they could. It was through this formal educational experience that their disciplined manner was dubbed the names, “The Holy Club”, “The Bible Moths”, or “The Methodists” (Tyerman 1872, 69-70).

The holy clubs became very influential in Wesley’s adult education practices in his ministry. His educational theory and practices were being developed through these group encounters. He demanded a balance between both cognitive and intellectual stimulation as well as the practical application (Henderson 1997, 43). Wesley was concerned that these formal groups be laboratories for living out what had been learned in the context of their education.

Wesley’s Non-formal Education

The previous discussion centered primarily on the influence of Wesley’s childhood experiences and the informal learning that took place within his family and during the early years of his life. The influence of Wesley’s formal education and the formation of the Holy Clubs are described. Both his family and education formed his theology and educational perspective. However, other primary influences were his trip to America, his encounter with the Moravians, and his Aldersgate experience. These non-formal learning experiences were instrumental in his overall theology and educational practices. Hence, these experiences were educational and provide a background for his order of salvation (*ordo salutis*).

John and Charles Wesley sailed for Georgia on October 21, 1735. John’s missionary journey was motivated by a desire to work out his own salvation and a longing to preach Christ to the Indians. Under the leadership of Colonel Oglethorpe, a friend of Samuel Wesley, John and Charles sought to accomplish these desires (Telford 1960, 74-75). However, their missionary work to the Indians was abandoned and John became the pastor of the English churches at Savannah and Frederica (Henderson 1997, 44).

During Wesley’s nearly three years of service in America (1735-1738) the influence of the Moravians had a crucial impact on John’s spirituality. He went to be a missionary to the Indians, but found that his experiences were a means to his own spiritual growth. It was through his conversations with the Moravians and their religious piety that Wesley was forced to question

his own spiritual condition. During their voyages in a succession of storms, Wesley, ashamed of his unwillingness to die, ask himself, “How is it thou hast no faith?” (Telford 1960, 78) The Moravians had made a significant impression on his life by their humility and devotion and their fearlessness in the storm. Wesley found that the Moravians were delivered from pride, anger, and revenge. They even sang in the midst of the storm, while the English passengers were trembling and screaming with terror (Telford 1960, 78-79).

One of the primary lessons learned from the Moravians was their belief that God granted individuals salvation instantaneously. At that moment, a person is born-again and could be assured of this divine favor by the subjective experience they called “the witness of the Spirit.”

Mr. Spangenberg, a Moravian minister from Savannah, ask Wesley a few questions. His first question, “Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?” Wesley was so surprised by the question that he didn’t know what to answer. The German observing this asked, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” He paused, and said, “I know He is the Savior of the world.” “True”, was the reply,” “but do you know He has saved you?” Wesley answered, “I hope He has died to save me.” Spangenberg only added, “Do you know yourself?” Wesley replied, “I do.” “But I fear they were vain words,” was his comment. Wesley’s heart calved to this faithful friend. He made many inquires about the Moravian Church at Hernhuth, and spent much time in the company of the German settlers (Telford 1960, 79-93).

John’s experience with Moravians and his missionary work were formative in his own salvation. He states in his journal,

It is now two years and almost four months since I left my native country in order to teach the Georgian Indians the nature of Christianity. But what have I learned myself in the meantime? Why (what I the least of all suspected), that I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God. (Wesley 1872, 12:33)

Wesley now desired with all his heart to find that faith which would deliver him from fear and doubt, and bring the assurance of the acceptance of God.

Wesley’s interaction with the Moravians was very influential in his own spiritual journey. Wesley returned to England very defeated and disillusioned. He continued to preach in England, but became very dissatisfied with his preaching. He was ready to quit. He contacted Peter Bohler, a German pastor and Moravian, for guidance. Bohler encouraged Wesley to seek after an experience of instantaneous conversion as the solution to his personal dilemma.

Wesley searched the Scriptures trying to find the solution to his spiritual condition. After several weeks of relentless searching, Wesley found the answer. While attending a Society meeting in Aldersgate Street where someone was reading Luther’s *Preface to the Epistle of the Romans*, Wesley describes his May 24, 1738, experience in his Journal:

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. (Wesley 1872, 1:103)

Wesley at once began to pray earnestly for his enemies and publicly testified to all present what he now felt.

Wesley's Aldersgate experience resulted in a "heart-felt" religion that became the central thrust and aim of Methodism. His preaching and educational endeavors were centered on the transformational power of the experience. The influence of the Moravian's focus on instantaneous conversation was foundational for his doctrine of sanctification and "holiness of heart and life."

Conclusions

Wesley's early life experiences were critical in shaping his faith and his educational ministry practices. The influence of his family, especially his mother Susanna shaped his view of education and Christian formation. His formal educational experiences at Oxford shaped intellectual pursuits and his understanding of group formation, through his participation in the "holy clubs." His experience with the Moravians shaped his theological understanding of sanctification as an instantaneous act, and his Aldersgate experience resulted in a religion that included the heart as well as the mind. The influence of these informal, formal, and non-formal experiences shaped Wesley's educational practices later in his life and ministry.

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