The Early Influences of John Wesley, Concerning His Views of the Ministry to Children, The Moravians

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Wesley and Children
Part 1 - The Early Influences of John Wesley, Concerning His Views of the Ministry to Children
Article 1 – The Moravians

This month we begin our walk through The Works of John Wesley. As we do so, we will focus on what John Wesley wrote concerning the ministry to children and children’s spirituality. In addition, we will look at what practices Wesley himself undertook concerning the ministry to children.

As we make our way along this journey with John Wesley, it will be our goal to uncover and examine the rich depth of the writings Wesley included that dealt with the ministry to children and children’s spirituality. To do this in a few short articles that do little more than summarize some main points would be an injustice to John Wesley and to Children’s Ministries. Therefore this series of articles will attempt to provide a depth and detail that this topic deserves. This will require time and patience, both on our part and on the part of the reader. We are confident that when the series of articles comes to an end, the time and effort will have enriched all of us.

We begin with an examination of the people who most likely helped to shape Wesley’s views about Children. In this first article, we will focus on a visit that John Wesley made in the summer of 1738 to a group of Lutheran Pietist in Germany known as the Moravian Brethren.

John Wesley Meets the Moravians
Wesley’s first encounter with the members of the Moravian Brethren occurred during his voyage to Georgia in the American colonies in the fall and winter of 1735-1736. Wesley was amazed by the display of peace and the level of faith these Moravians possessed. During times of great distress and rough seas on the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean, while Wesley and many of the other passengers on board were greatly shaken, the Moravians seemed unafraid.

In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the main-sail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, ‘Was you not afraid?’ He answered, ‘I thank God, no.’ I asked, ‘But were not your women and children afraid?’ He replied, mildly, ‘No; our women and children are not afraid to die.’

From them I went to their crying, trembling neighbours, and pointed out to them the difference in the hour of trial, between him that feareth God, and him that feareth him not. At twelve the wind fell. This was the most glorious day which I have hitherto seen.

There is little doubt that Wesley was impressed by what he saw in the behaviour of the Moravians, including their children. His further interactions with the Brethren and one of their members, Peter Bohler, encouraged Wesley to seek out more about them and the depth of faith in Christ he saw in them.

Wesley eventually returned to England from Georgia in February of 1738. Upon his return to the European continent, he made an effort to continue his correspondence with the Moravians and Peter Bohler. Finally, in hope of learning more from “those holy men who were themselves living witnesses of the full power of faith...,” Wesley travelled to Germany in July of 1738. There Bohler greeted him and introduced him to the leader of the Moravians, Count Nicolaus Von Zinzendorf.
Count Nicholaus Von Zinzendorf

Born in 1700 AD, Zinzendorf grew up on his grandmother’s estate in Gross-Hennersdorf in Saxony. It was there that, as a child, Zinzendorf was shaped by the religious views of those whose names are most closely associated with the religious movement known as Pietism. Zinzendorf was the godson of the founder of the movement, Philipp Spener. At the age of ten, Zinzendorf was sent to grammar school at Halle, which was run by August Hermann Francke, who is considered by some to have been “the greatest missionary leader in the world.”

All of these influences stirred the heart of young Zinzendorf and moved him and five of his fellow classmates at Halle to form the “Order of the Grain of Mustard Seed.” This group pledged to “love the whole human family and to spread the Gospel.”

It was Zinzendorf’s commitment to missions, guided by his Pietist religious views he had first embraced during his childhood that led to the creation of a Moravian missionary movement. Peter Bohler had become an integral part of this movement.

John Wesley’s Visit to Halle and Hernhut (Hernhuth)

In July of 1738, Wesley toured Halle, the school that Zinzendorf had attended as a child. It would seem by Wesley’s own account, which follows, that Wesley was deeply impressed with what he witnessed there. Wesley, as will be discussed in a future article, would eventually establish two schools for children in England.

Wesley then came to Hernhut. Hernhut was the name of the community of Moravians established by Count Zinzendorf on his estate in Saxony. Upon his arrival, Wesley set out to interview a number of Moravians, including David Nitschman, Hantz Neusser, David Schneider, Christoph Demuth, and Arvid Gradin.

A consistent pattern emerged from within the stories of these men. In almost every case, these individuals talked of pious parents or grandparents, who had instructed them from childhood on the foundations of the Christian religion. Each gave testimony to having possessed a strong and genuine faith in Christ as children. However, in almost every account, these men had experienced a time when their faith in Christ grew dim as they grew into early adulthood.

Although their experiences differed, in every case these men had their faith in Christ restored. They had all returned to a faith, the foundations of which had been established in their childhood. It would seem likely that Wesley himself would have also picked up on this pattern, a pattern of men whose lives were undoubtedly impacted by their spiritual formation as children.

Wesley also took a special interest in what the Moravians had included in their Church’s constitution. Their constitution, **AN EXTRACT OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CHURCH OF THE MORAVIAN BRETHREN AT HERNHUTH, LAID BEFORE THE THEOLOGICAL ORDER AT WIREMBERG, IN THE YEAR 1733**, included a number of specific references to the commitment the Moravians placed on their duty and ministry to
the children at Hernhut. What follows are the specific portions of the constitution that concerned children.

3. The Pastor, or Teacher, is to be an Overseer of the whole flock, and every person therein; to 
baptize the children; diligently to form their minds, and bring them up ‘in the nature and 
admonition of the Lord;’ when he finds in them a sincere love of the cross, then to receive 
them into the Church....

4. We have also another sort of Deacons, who take care that nothing be wanting to the Orphan-
house, the poor, the sick, and the strangers

10. In the year 1727, four-and-twenty men, and as many women, agreed that each of them would 
spend an hour every day in praying to God for his blessing on his people: And for this purpose both 
the men and the women chose a place where any of their own sex, who were in distress, might be 
present with them. The same number of unmarried women, of unmarried men, of boys, and of 
girls, were afterward, at their desire, added to them, who pour out their souls before God, not 
only for their own brethren, but also for other churches and persons, that have desired to be 
mentioned in their prayers. And this perpetual intercession has never ceased day or night, since 
its first beginning.

12. In the Orphan-house, about seventy children are brought up separate, according to their sex: 
Beside which, several experienced persons are appointed to consult with the parents, touching the 
education of the other children. In teaching them Christianity, we make use of Luther’s 
Catechism, and study the amending their wills as well as their understanding; finding by 
experience, that when their will is moved, they often learn more in a few hours, than otherwise 
in many months. Our little children we instruct chiefly by hymns; whereby we find the most 
important truths most successfully insinuated into their minds.

13...As soon as a child is born, prayer is made for it, and if it may be, it is baptized in the presence 
of the whole Church. Before it is weaned, it is brought into the assembly on the Lord’s day.

14. Whoever, either of the male or female children, seek God with their whole heart, need not be 
much incited to come to the Lord’s Supper. Before they receive, they are examined both in 
private by the Pastor, and also in public: And then, after an exhortation by the Senior, are by 
him, through laying on of hands, added to the Church and confirmed. 

Wesley would later in his life move to distance himself from the Moravians and Count Zinzendorf, due to 
some theological differences. These theological differences however, were in no way related to the 
practices of the ministry to children that Wesley saw in the Moravians.

The Moravians and Count Zinzendorf definitely played a significant role in shaping Wesley’s views on the 
value and absolute necessity of the need for spiritual formation for children. And, as Wesley 
contemplated all he came to see in the Moravians and their ministry to children, he may have reflected 
on his own childhood and his own spiritual foundations that had been established by his parents.

Next month, we will turn our attention to the one individual who may have had the greatest impact on 
Wesley and on his views concerning children, his mother, Susannah Wesley.

Contributed by Dan Harris – Coordinator of Evangelism – Children’s Ministries International
Pietism is a late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century movement within (primarily German) Protestantism which sought to supplement the emphasis on institutions and dogma in orthodox Protestant circles by concentrating on the "practice of piety," rooted in inner experience and expressing itself in a life of religious commitment. Pietism was nothing new. It can be traced back with discernible continuity to the ancient fathers (Macarius, Ephraem Syrus, Gregory of Nyssa, et al.) and to the *devotio moderna* of the late Middle Ages (Nicholas of Cusa, Tauler, et al.). However, it took on a distinctively Protestant form and was officially labeled "Pietism" during the ministry of Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705) in Frankfurt, Germany, although earlier adumbrations of Pietism were manifest in earlier Protestant theologians such as Johann Arndt (1555-1621). Peter Heltzel, *Philipp Jacob Spener and the Rise of Pietism in Germany*, 1998 (The Boston Collaborative Encyclopaedia of Modern Western Theology) accessed at http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_themes_410_pietism.htm#Philipp Jakob Spener and the Rise of Pietism in Germany, March 15, 2011.


J.E. Hutton’s, *A History of Moravian Missions...* 5.


Ibid., 1:128

Ibid., 1:133

Ibid., 1:135-136

Ibid., 1:136-137

Ibid., 1:138

Ibid., 1:142-146 (Portions of text in bold where not originally in bold. This was done for emphasis.)