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The Early Influences of John Wesley, Concerning His Views of the Ministry to Children, Susannah Wesley: Conquering the Will not the Spirit

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

In our effort to understand the influence Susannah Wesley had on her son John, we will focus on a letter sent to John from Susannah in July of 1732. When Susannah died in July of 1742, Wesley chose to include the letter he had received from her in his journal. Within the letter written to John by his mother, there are a number of themes including: 1) the necessity to break the will of the child; 2) the educational method of Susanna Wesley; 3) and the eight key aspects or “by-laws” included by Susannah in the education of her children. Each of the aforementioned themes will be dealt with this month in three separate articles.

In this first article, we will look at Susannah’s belief in the necessity to conquer the will of the child. For those who associate the breaking of the will of the child with typical eighteenth century Victorian ideas of child-rearing, a negative image of childrearing might appear. Typical Victorian childrearing, for a poor child, often included a life of being forced into some form of menial labor to support the family at a very early age. The child of the wealthy family was typically either spoiled with all of the extravagances of life, or they spent the majority of their formative years in the care of nannies and tutors, seldom having much contact with the parents.

Susannah’s views and the practices she employed in the rearing of her children, however, did not look anything like the two extremes described above. Susannah’s methods included both a stern and consistent pattern of discipline that were guided by the hope of a specific behavioral outcome, which she endeavoured to teach her children. Susannah, as we will see, sought to conquer the will of the child without breaking the child’s spirit in the process.

Susannah wrote, “In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will, and bring them to an obedient temper.” Susannah understood that each child was unique. Her letter included a number of comments dealing with the different rates that her children progressed in their education. When it came to bringing the will of the child under control, for Susannah, there was no place for slow and steady for any of them. “...the subjecting the will, is a thing which must be done at once; and the sooner the better.”

Susannah’s views, which might be labelled as cruel or extreme to some twenty-first century child psychologist or parenting expert, were anything but cruel or extreme. Susannah believed that neglecting to conquer the will of the child would only bring about greater hardships for the child later in life. She believed that if this was neglected, the child was more likely to develop a “stubbornness and obstinacy, which is hardly ever conquered; and never, without using such severity as would be as painful to me as to the child.”

In Susannah’s view, the cruel parents were those, like was common in wealthier circles of society in eighteenth century England, who over indulged their children. She witnessed parents who either through ignorance, or through a juvenile form of entertainment, would allow their children to embrace
habits and practices that the parents themselves would later in the child’s life have to turn to harsh measures in an attempt to break.

Susannah understood clearly that a child who learned first to subdue their own will, and who came to honor and obey the will of their parents, could then have a better chance of learning to subdue their will and obey the will of their Heavenly Father.

“...religion is nothing else than the doing the will of God, and not our own: That the one grand impediment to our temporal and eternal happiness being this self-will, no indulgences of it can be trivial, no denial unprofitable. Heaven or hell depends on this alone. So that the parent who studies to subdue it in his child, works together with God in the renewing and saving a soul.”

And in a sober reply to those who might disagree with her, Susannah added; “The parent who indulges it (self-will) does the devil’s work, makes religion impracticable, salvation unattainable; and does all that in him lies to damn his child, soul and body for ever.”

John, with his inclusion of this letter within his journal on the occasion of his mother’s death, seems to give his readers the message of the high value he placed on what he learned from his mother on the value of conquering the child’s will. In addition, John wrote three sermons titled, On Family Religion, On the Education of Children, and On Obedience to Parents in which the topic of the will of the child was addressed.

This article series will look at each of these sermons in depth at a later date, but what is clearly revealed in these sermons and in other places within John’s writings, is the clear influence Susannah had on John. This is especially true in the understanding that not only is the outcome of the conquering of the will done in the spirit of love, so should be the methods used to accomplish it. John, in On Family Religion, writes:

“Your children, while they are young, you may restrain from evil, not only by advice, persuasion, and reproof, but also by correction; only remembering, that this means is to be used last,—not till all other have been tried, and found to be ineffectual. And even then you should take the utmost care to avoid the very appearance of passion. Whatever is done should be done with mildness; nay, indeed, with kindness too. Otherwise your own spirit will suffer loss, and the child will reap little advantage.”

Echoing Susannah’s words, John relayed the important and eternally significant role the parents played in the spiritual development of the child when he wrote,

“...immortal spirits who God hath, for a time, entrusted to your care, that you may train them up in all holiness, and fit them for the enjoyment of God in eternity. This is the glorious and important trust;...Every child, therefore, you are to watch over with the utmost care, that, when you are called to give an account of each to the Father of Spirits, you may give your accounts with joy and not with grief.”

Susannah sought to help her children to come to a saving faith in Christ. This process, she believed, required that the will of the child had to be conquered. Her correction she employed within this process, however, would be insufficient if the child was not also taught the reasons behind it. Nor would it serve the child any lasting benefit if what was being done did not come from a heart of pure and holy love.
It would seem, at least in what we see in John Wesley’s own understanding of love, and in how he would later help express to parents the need to conquer their children’s self-will through a process that had to include this same holy love, Susannah was successful. Wesley wrote in *On the Obedience To Parents*,

“Have you broken their wills from their earliest infancy; and do you still continue so to do, in opposition both to nature and custom? Did you explain to them, as soon as their understanding began to open, the reasons of your proceeding thus? Did you point out to them the will of God as the sole law of every intelligent creature; and show them it is the will of God that they should obey you in all things? Do you inculcate this over and over again, till they perfectly comprehend it? O never be weary of this labour of love! And your labour will not always be in vain.”

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$ii$ Ibid., 388.
$iii$ Ibid., 388.
$iv$ Ibid., 389. (self-will) added for clarification.
$v$ Correction, as used by Wesley here, seems to imply some form of physical punishment.
$vi$ Ibid., II, 2, 79.