The Early Influences of John Wesley, Concerning His Views of the Ministry to Children, Susannah Wesley: Eight Key "By-Laws"

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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 third article, we will look at eight key aspects or “by-laws” that Susannah included in the conclusion of her letter to John. Susannah wrote, “There were several by-laws observed among us…I mention them here, because I think them useful.” These “by-laws” appear to have been a summary of the valuable lessons she had learned in the process of helping her children with their educational and spiritual growth.

1. The Benefit of Honesty
Susannah observed that when her children found themselves to be in error, the threat of punishment, which at times failed to deter certain behaviors, also on occasion led her children to lie in an effort to avoid punishment. Believing that this only made the situation worse, Susannah turned to offering benefits for honesty as a solution. “…Whoever was charged with a fault, of which they were guilty, if they would ingenuously confess it, and promise to amend, should not be beaten. This rule prevented a great deal of lying, and would have done more, if one in the family would have observed it.”

It should be clarified that Susannah’s use of the word “beaten” should not be associated with thoughts of child abuse. Be assured that Susannah most likely used the term for the common practice of spanking as a form of correction.

It is also worth noting that John Wesley also encouraged parents and teachers to use physical or corporal punishment, like spanking, only as a last resort when disciplining children. In *On Family Religion*, John wrote;

“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.”

Susannah’s aim, as John also clearly indicates, was to avoid the use of any form of physical punishment if possible. By encouraging an environment that allowed her children to find safety in being honest, corporal punishment could be avoided. Unfortunately, as we see from Susannah’s comments, at least one of her children took longer than the others to embracing this idea.
2. **Consistency**
If one of her children was caught disobeying, and the need for punishment was needed, that disobedience never went unpunished.

3. **A Clean Slate**
If punishment was administered to any of her children, “and if they amended,” the act of disobedience was not to be continually held over the child. Susannah knew her children were human and were likely to err from time to time. However, if the child learned from their error and the error was never again repeated, it would have been unfair to associate the behavior with the child ever again. Although not directly indicated by Susannah in her letter, it would seem that this “by-law” was guided by scripture where it is written; “as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

4. **Obedience Rewarded**
Just as the need for a consistent pattern of discipline was used to correct her children when they messed up, Susannah hoped to encourage a pattern of good behavior in her children by using a consistent pattern of praise and rewards for obedience.

5. **It’s the Thought that Counts**
Susannah wrote that “…if ever any child performed an act of obedience, or did any thing with an intention to please, though the performance was not well, yet the obedience and intention should be kindly accepted.”

6. **Respect for Others**
Learning to respect the property of others, regardless of how little or how much that something might have been worth, appears to have been something Susannah desperately wanted her children to understand. Even more than that, Susannah took the opportunity, when discussing this “by-law,” to indicate that a lack of respect for the property of others was a common problem in the larger society.

“The rule can never be too much inculcated (instilled) on the minds of children; and from the want of parents or governors doing it as they ought, proceeds that shameful neglect of justice which we may observe in the world.”

7. **Being True to One’s Word**
Susannah impressed upon her children the belief that once any of her children gave a possession away to another family member or friend, they were to be true to their word and never ask that it be returned. “…A gift once bestowed, and so the right passed away from the donor, be not resumed.”

Peace and harmony within the family, as within society, is something that Susannah cherished. Many parents have sought this same peace within their own families. Just as respecting the property of others can go a long way toward creating peace, so can encouraging the children to stand behind their words and actions with consistency and respect. Those who keep their promises are those who also help to keep the peace.
8. Importance of an Education for Her Daughters

The eighth and final of Susannah’s “by-laws” begins with a statement concerning the importance she placed on making sure her daughters, along with her sons, received a solid education. Susannah wrote: “That no girl be taught to work till she can read very well.”

History shows that opportunities for women in eighteenth century England were limited. The less education a woman possessed, the greater would be her difficulty to fend for her children and she would have been.

John Wesley, who wrote often of his concern for the orphans he encountered, defined an orphan differently than most people do today. Today, we define an orphan as a child who has lost both of his or her parents. Wesley defined an orphan as a child who had lost his father, but whose mother could very well still be living. This difference in the understanding of an orphan indicates the dire situation faced by many widows when left to fend for their children and themselves.

There is little doubt that Susannah, being a woman of the eighteenth century, understood this, and it is most likely what inspired this “by-law.” She continued by adding, “…for the putting of children to learn sewing before they can read perfectly, is the very reason, why so few women can read fit to be heard, and never to be well understood.”

For Susannah, the education of her children included never losing sight of the realities that existed in society. Failing to understand where society fell short, whether it was in the lack of respect often displayed among neighbors or the lack of value placed on women in general, might in turn lead to shortcomings in the education of her children.

An education that helped her children understand these shortcomings within society and that included helping them see what they could do to improve it appears to have been the a goal of Susannah’s “by-laws.”

In addition, John Wesley seems to see a second and even more profound goal as the driving force behind his mother’s dedication to the education of her children. Wesley wrote of his mother: “I cannot but further observe, that even she had been, in her measure and degree, a preacher of righteousness. This I learned from a letter, wrote long since to my father.” In that letter, Susannah writes:

“—As I am a woman, so I am also mistress of a large family. And though the superior charge of the souls contained in it, lies upon you; yet, in your absence, I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care, as a talent committed to me under a trust, by the great Lord of all the families, both of heaven and earth. And if I am unfaithful to him or you, in neglecting to improve these talents, how shall I answer unto him, when he shall command me to render an account of my stewardship?”

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\(^{ii}\) Ibid., 392.

\(^{iii}\) Correction, as used by Wesley here, seems to imply some form of physical punishment.


vii Ibid., 392. (instilled) added for clarity.

viii Ibid., 392-393.

ix Ibid., 393.

x Ibid., 393.

xi John Wesley, The Works of John Wesley, Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2002), 385. This second letter, also included in Wesley’s Journal, was dated February 6, 1711-12.