June, 2011

The Early Influences of John Wesley, Concerning His Views of the Ministry to Children, From the Mouths of Children: John Wooley

G. Dan Harris

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/gdanharris/9/
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.

Our focus continues on those who influenced Wesley in these areas of ministry to children. In several articles, we will look at a number of accounts Wesley included in his journal that came directly from the children themselves. Wesley encountered a number of children, and stories of children, who testified to and displayed a deep level of holiness and spiritual maturity. Despite the fact that Wesley often did not expand on his thoughts concerning these accounts, the fact that he included them, and almost never discounted them, seems to clearly indicate that he took each account as genuine.

This first article will focus on the account of John Woolley, who died at the age of thirteen. It was on the occasion of his funeral, preached by Wesley, that Wesley chose to include the account of the short life and spiritual growth of this young boy.

John Woolley had been a student at the Kingswood school founded by John Wesley. Woolley had been removed from the school due to poor behavior on his part; and for a period of time, he was living on the streets. This changed when, as the account reads, “He came to the new-room. Mr. Wesley was then speaking of disobedience to parents. He was quite confounded, and thought there never was in the world so wicked a child as himself.”

Woolley returned to the home of his parents. Although he did not share with them the reason for the change in his attitude, he began to spend long periods of time alone in his room praying. The joy he would eventually find in Christ did not come immediately. Woolley would testify later to a period of time when he struggled mightily with thoughts of suicide. “And now the devil began to set upon him with all his might, continually tempting him to self-murder: Sometimes he was vehemently pressed to hang himself; sometimes to leap into the river.”

Despite being tempted to end his own life, Woolley instead found himself spending more and more time in prayer. The account gives no exact indication of how long young Woolley dealt with this difficult situation, but it does give his testimony of the moment that it all came to an end.

“After he had been one day wrestling with God, he saw himself, he said, surrounded on a sudden with an inexpressible light, and was so filled with joy and the love of God, that he scarce knew where he was; and with such love to all mankind, that he could have laid himself on the ground, for his worst enemies to trample upon.”

For a short period of time, John Woolley lived in peace. And from the indication of his parents, he had truly been changed by Christ. He became extremely helpful around the home, going out of his way to be kind to his brothers, sisters, and his parents.

Woolley became a regular attendee every time the Word was preached, and he even began to preach the blessings of holiness himself. His encounter with a local farmer whom he told, “Without holiness no
man shall see the Lord,” had such a tremendous effect on the man that “he caught the child in his arms, and knew not how to part with him.”

Up to this point in the account of Woolley, John Wesley knew little of what young Woolley was going through. And despite having been a student at the Kingswood school, there is no clear indication that Wesley had any personal knowledge of Woolley. This changed when Woolley became ill.

From what we read, the illness that struck Woolley seemed to take his life in a matter of just a few short weeks. During his illness, his parents indicated that his concerns were never for himself, but they were directed toward his family and for John and Charles Wesley, whom he included in his prayers.

His concern for his father was particularly great. He indicated to his mother how worried he was that his father did not “know God; (and) if he dies in the state he is in now, he cannot be saved.” He told his mother, “I have prayed for him, and will pray for him.” A note in Wesley’s journal indicates that his father did die not too long after he spoke of this to his mother.

Whether or not Woolley sensed this, there is no doubt that his concern for his mother and father was comforted by what he believed Christ would do for them. “If God should give him the true faith, and then take him to himself, do not you fear, --do not you be troubled: God has promised to be a father to the fatherless, and a husband to the widow. I will pray for him and you in heaven; and I hope we shall sing Hallelujah in heaven together.”

Woolley’s last days were not pleasant, as he dealt with much pain and suffering. But through it all, Woolley continued to praise Christ.

“On Thursday morning his mother asked him how he did: He said, ‘I have had much struggling to-night, but my Saviour is so loving to me, I do not mind it; it is no more than nothing to me.’

Then he said, ‘I desire to be buried from the Room; and I desire Mr. Wesley would preach a sermon over me, on those words of David, (unless he thinks any other to be more fit,) Before I was afflicted I went astray; but now I have kept thy word”

Wesley wrote that he spent some time with the boy that night, asking the boy if he was prepared to die, and what Christ meant to him. Woolley relayed that despite the great physical pain he was experiencing, he possessed a deep love for Christ and that he was ready to die and be forever with Christ.

Wesley gives no indication that he doubted a word Woolley relayed to him, and there seems to be little doubt that Wesley, despite the somber occasion, had to be impressed by it. Wesley was impressed by another conversation Woolley had with his mother a few days earlier. Again it showed the boy’s mature spiritual understanding of what Christ had done and was doing for him.

“Awhile after he said, ‘O mother, how is this? If a man does not do his work, the masters in the world will not pay him his wages. But it is not so with God; he gives me good wages, and yet I am sure I have done nothing to gain them. O it is a free gift, it is free for every soul, for Christ has died for all.”

It was on Sunday, February 21, 1742, that Wesley preached John Woolley’s funeral. And there is no doubt that Wesley had been greatly influence by the life and faith of this young boy. Wesley wrote, “In
the evening I explained the ‘exceeding great and precious promises’ which are given to us: A strong confirmation whereof I read, in a plain artless account of a child, whose body then lay before us.”

Contributed by Dan Harris – Coordinator of Evangelism, Children’s Ministries International

---

2 Ibid., 358.
3 Ibid., 358.
4 Ibid., 358.
5 Ibid., 359.
6 Ibid., 359.
7 Ibid., 360.
8 Ibid., 360.
9 Ibid., 357.