JOHN WESLEY'S CORRESPONDENCE WITH HIS FATHER

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It is a commonplace in Wesley studies that Susanna Wesley exercised a greater influence over her developing children than did her husband, Samuel. In his scholarly work, *The Young Mr. Wesley,* for example, V.H.H. Green has stressed the impact of Susanna's dominant personality as the most significant factor in John Wesley's early development. And Wesley, himself, when he was a fellow of Lincoln college, recalled with favor the days of his childhood when Susanna instructed him on Thursday evenings in matters both moral and practical.2

While encomiums have been lavished upon Susanna, with respect to both her piety and her role as a mother, Samuel has not fared as well in the secondary literature. Harmon characterizes him as "absentminded."3 Green contends he was "obstinate, passionate, partisan, and pedantic."4 Robert Moore claims the father possessed an "arrogant manner,"5 and was a "tremendously domineering yet ineffective man."6 And Edwards notes, to top it all, that the father of the Wesleys "showed all the massive qualities of a bull-dog."7 But is such description fair? More importantly, is it accurate? One way of assessing the appropriateness of the preceding descriptions is to examine critically the correspondence which passed between the father and his son for clues not only of Samuel's character, but also of his positive influence on the development of John Wesley.

I. Wesley's Letter Writing

Letter writing as an art form came to fruition during the eighteenth century,8 and John Wesley's ability as a letter writer was clearly equal to the vaunted standards of his times. In the estimation of Sir Leslie Stephen, a noted British author and critic, Wesley's correspondence showed

4 Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley,* 44.
6 Ibid.
"remarkable literary power." It was lucid, pungent, and very expressive, reflecting both the man and his many correspondents. And Frank Baker notes that Wesley exhibited such freedom in his correspondence that he appears before us "warts and all." But it is not only the quality of Wesley's letters which is noteworthy, it is their quantity as well. Wesley was, without doubt, a prolific writer. The Oxford edition of his works will publish over 3,500 letters which represent only a "fraction of his actual output." And although only 120 letters passed between John and his father from 1724 to 1735, as compared to the 160 which passed between him and his mother from 1723 to 1739, when the different time spans are taken into account, due to the death of Samuel in 1735, the frequencies are roughly the same.

For the purposes of this brief study, the correspondence between father and son will be organized into three major divisions. The first category will begin with the earliest extant letter of Samuel to his son and will cover the period up to, but not including, the earliest letter of John to his father (1/5/25 – 9/5/28). The second category will begin with the first extant letter of John to his father (12/19/29), and will include Samuel's last letter to John (1/21/35). And finally, the third category will gather up the few references to Samuel Wesley which appear in John's letters after his father's death (11/16/42 – 1/23/78). This organization of the letters, in addition to their content, should display some of the salient features of the father/son relationship as it progressed over time, and should also offer some clue as to the character of the elder Wesley.

II. The First Period: From Samuel 1/5/25 – 9/5/28

A. Money Problems

There are twenty-two letters in existence covering this first period, and all of them are by Samuel. None of John Wesley's very early letters have survived, and this makes an examination of the documents of this period that much more difficult. It is like listening to only one end of a phone conversation. Nevertheless, some revealing items emerge. First of all, financial difficulties, both John's and Samuel's, are a recurring motif. The initial letters indicate that while John was a Fellow at Lincoln College, he was very frequently in debt. In this respect, he resembled his father who on one occasion was actually placed in jail at the behest of a certain

11Ibid., 28.
12Ibid., 83.
13Ibid.
Mr. Pinder who was a friend of a political candidate Samuel Wesley had the supreme misfortune of opposing.

B. The Question of Ordination

Another major item which emerges during this period is the question concerning John’s desire for ordination. In a letter dated 26 January 1725, Samuel does not initially favor this idea as evidenced by his cautious reply, “By all this you see I’m not for your going over hastily into Orders. When I’m for your taking ‘em you shall know it.” Susanna Wesley, on the other hand, favored such a pursuit, and in her encouraging letter to John on 23 February 1725, revealed something of the tension between her and Samuel:

But ‘tis an unhappiness almost peculiar to our family that your father and I seldom think alike. I approve the disposition of your mind, I think this season of Lent the most proper for your preparation for Orders, and I think the sooner you are a deacon the better...

About a month after Susanna’s letter, Samuel finally came around and wrote to John on the 17th of March, “I’ve changed my mind since may last, and now incline to your going this summer into Orders . . .” Oddly enough, thirteen years later, when John recounted his early spiritual pilgrimage in his journal on 24 May 1738, he confused the roles of his parents. He remembered nothing of his mother’s encouragement, nor of his father’s disapproval, and instead wrote, “When I was about twenty-two, my father pressed me to enter into holy orders.”

C. The Fellowship at Lincoln

At Lincoln College during this time, there were three fellowships, one of which was vacated by John Thorold on May 3, 1725. Upon learning this, Samuel Wesley immediately “set about pressing his son’s claims.” In a letter dated 2 August 1725, Samuel wrote to John, “I was at Gainsboro’ last week to wait on Sir John Thorold, [the father of one who had resigned] and shall again, by God’s leave, tomorrow, to endeavor to make way for you from that quarter.” In addition, Samuel Wesley related to John that he would make inquiries on his behalf to Mr. Morley, the Rector of Lincoln, to Richard Reynolds, the bishop of Lincoln, and lastly, to his son Samuel who had some influence as an usher at Westminster School.

14Edwards, Family Circle, 19.
15Baker, Works of Wesley, 25: 158..
16Ibid., 160.
17Ibid.
19Green, The Young Mr. Wesley, 76.
20Ibid.
22See Green, The Young Mr. Wesley, 77. n. 1.
From Samuel’s drafts to John, especially the one on 19 October 1725, it appears that John’s candidacy was not universally welcomed at Lincoln. The father, in a pastoral fashion, attempted to comfort and encourage his son during this trying period. “The best way to deal with our adversaries,” Samuel advised, “is to turn the war and their own vaunted arms against them.” But it took until March of the next year for all the opposition to subside. Finally on the 17th of that same month, John Wesley was elected “unanimo consensu” to the vacant fellowship, an honor achieved, in part, through the good graces of the elder Wesley.

At this time of achievement and celebration, John’s diary records that he wrote to his father on the 18th and to his brother, Samuel, on the 21st, probably to express gratitude for their labors in the procurement of the fellowship. Unfortunately, the letter to his father has been lost, but the one to his older brother indicates that the lion’s share of thanks, again oddly enough, went to him and not to the father. John wrote to Samuel Jr., “I return you my sincere and hearty thanks . . . in the pains you take to qualify me for the enjoyment of that success, which I owe chiefly, not to say wholly, to your interest.” Could John have forgotten so quickly all that his father had done? But again, it is not known what John had written to Samuel Sr. on 18 March 1726.

D. Doctrinal and Ecclesiastical Issues

The correspondence of the first period also contains a number of doctrinal issues that Wesley discussed with his father. In 1725, for example, just as John had written to his mother concerning the suitability of Thomas á Kempis as a possible spiritual mentor, so too did he write to his father on this very same subject. In a letter on 14 July 1725, Samuel urged his son to be critical in his appropriation of this spiritual guide:

As for T. Kempis, all the world are apt to strain o’ one side or t’other. And ‘tis no wonder if contemplative men . . . when they observed how mad the bulk of the world was for sensual pleasures, should run the matter too far o’ the contrary extreme, and attempt to persuade us to have no senses at all . . .

But for all that, mortification is still an indispensable Christian duty. The world’s a siren, and we must have a care of her . . .

This balanced and judicious reply to his son’s inquiry was probably a product of Samuel’s extensive studies in Patristics, a favorite pastime of the Anglicans of his day, and one which he heartily recommended to his son as well. Indeed, in two letters during 1725, Samuel urged John

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24 Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley*, 80.
26 Ibid., 25: 190.
27 Ibid., 162.
28 Ibid., 171.
29 Ibid., 170, 176.
to “Master St. Chrysostom.” But the Epworth parson had not always been a member of the Church of England. In fact, as a youth, he had attended a Dissenting academy, but renounced the religion of his parents and went to Oxford in 1683 with the intention of entering the Anglican church. Such a move, born out of a strong and abiding conviction, explains, in part, Samuel’s staunch defense of both England’s church and her king. The elder Wesley often revealed this pride he felt in his church to his son. Thus, when Samuel entertained a question from John concerning revelation, he remarked that the Church of England is “exactly agreeable to it.” Moreover, in a letter on 14 July 1725, Samuel urged John to master the Thirty Nine Articles of the Anglican church.

E. Family Matters

The last item of the correspondence of this period, as it concerns a delicate family matter, is the most troubling, but it is also, perhaps, a most revealing aspect of Samuel’s character. In August of 1725, Samuel expressed his disappointment in a letter to John concerning Hetty’s (Mehetable) recent behavior, “I hope with more success than I’ve done for your wretched sister at whose elopement this day your mother was a little shocked, but has partly recovered it.” And in the same letter, the father referred to his daughter as “lost — though she’s not so well as dead.”

What was behind this unhappy turn of events was Hetty’s deep affection for a young lawyer who was “apparently intensely disliked by her father.” Eventually, the young man suggested elopement. Thinking she would be married the next day, Hetty ran off and spent the night with him, but the young suitor left soon after the night of romance. Deeply hurt and frightened, Hetty “had no alternative but to return home to Wroot to face the wrath of her scandalized parents.” To further complicate an already distressing matter, Hetty made a vow upon returning home that she would marry “the first man that might offer, whose suit her parents might approve.” In what appears to be an attempt to protect the family name, Samuel urged his daughter to marry William Wright, a plumber and glazier. Hetty consented to this arrangement, and was most miserable,

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 170.
33 Ibid., 177.
34 Ibid., 176.
35 Moore, John Wesley and Authority, 53.
36 Harmon, Susanna, 119.
37 Adam Clarke, Memoirs of the Wesley Family (New York: Lane and Tippett, 1856), 535.
38 According to Frank Baker, Hetty became pregnant because of that one night with the lawyer. See Harmon’s discussion on page 122.
for her marriage on 13 October 1725 did little to reestablish the family's favor, (certainly not her father's) and her husband turned out to be "a wastrel, drunken and dissolute in his behavior, having nothing in common with his cultured, sensitive wife." 39

This is how matters stood through the summer of 1726 when John returned home from Oxford to assist his father in pastoral duties at Epworth and Wroot. During this time, John argued with his father repeatedly concerning his treatment of Hetty and his lack of forgiveness. On August 28, John was bold enough to preach a sermon on "Universal Charity; or Charity Due to Wicked Persons." 40 Samuel was stung, and protested to his youngest son Charles, "Every day, you hear how he contradicts me, and takes your sister's part before my face. Nay, he disputes with me . . ." 41 In time, John learned from Charles how his father had "burst out against him," 42 and so the "penitent" son went to his father to seek forgiveness. John "would never, he promised, contradict him again; he would transcribe for him whenever he wished," and Green adds, "Father and son burst into tears; then they kissed." 43 But all was not well, for "Rash Judging" was the title of a subsequent sermon preached by John. "This parting blow angered Samuel so much that he protested to Samuel Jr."

III. The Second Period: From and To Samuel 12/19/29—1/21/35

A. Doctrinal Issues

The second series of letters contains ten pieces, seven from John to his father, and three that he received in return. Although this number of letters is few, one of the most important interchanges between Samuel and John is amply documented here. The first extant letter of John to his father, however, can hardly be called a letter at all; it is really nothing but an extended quotation from Mr. Ditton's *Discourse on the Resurrection of Christ*. But the subject matter is an interesting one. Ditton not only stressed the significance of the resurrection of Christ for the Christian faith, but he also attempted a problem in theodicy, that is, the origin of evil. Moreover, part of Ditton's argument was buttressed by a kind of reasoning concerning evil and the natural order that also appeared in Wesley's writings at a much later date. 45 Ditton maintained that "evil is a deviation from those measures of eternal, unerring order and reason

40 Ibid., 110.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Moore, *Wesley and Authority*, 54-55.
— not to choose what is worthy to be chosen..."^{46} And on two more occasions, in December 1730 and in January 1731, John again took up the question of the origin of evil.^{47} No doubt, he thought his father to be interested in such a highly speculative subject as well.

B. The Holy Club

On 11 December 1730, while John was at Lincoln College as a teaching fellow, he wrote to his father that he expected to be "in company with the gentleman who did us the honour to take the first notice of our little society."^{48} John, of course, was referring to the "Holy Club" which had taken root at Oxford in November 1729 through is efforts and those of his brother Charles. This pious society stressed the importance of the sacraments, prayer, Bible reading, obedience to the precepts of the college, and charitable endeavors which were largely manifested in the form of prison visitation. In the words of Vulliamy, it was a society "of very young and very earnest High Churchmen, with evangelists views and a true desire to lead the lives of exemplary Christians."^{49}

On two occasions, John wrote to his father concerning the status of the Holy Club. The content and tone of the correspondence reveals that the son was seeking both comfort and guidance from his father because of the society's lack of growth. In a letter dated 11 June 1731 he wrote:

> Since our return our little company, that used to meet us on a Sunday evening, is shrunk into almost none at all. Mr. Morgan is sick at Holt; Mr. Boyce is at his father's house at Barton; Mr. Kirkham must very shortly leave Oxford to be his uncle's curate, and a young gentleman of Christ Church, who used to make a fourth, either afraid, or ashamed, or both, is returned to the ways of the world, and studiously shuns our company.^{50}

Furthermore, in a letter on 13 June 1733, John confided in his father that many at Lincoln college took exception to the singularity of this religious society, and this was the reason, John believed, for his "diminution of fortune, loss of friends, and of reputation."^{51} At one point, John confessed quite frankly to Samuel that "our seven and twenty communicants at St. Mary's were on Monday shrunk to five,"^{52} and he knew that his father would be sympathetic. Indeed, Samuel, himself, had been an "ardent supporter of religious societies,"^{53} and had organized one for

^{46}Ibid., 10. n. 23. Outler maintains that Wesley probably derived his notion of "fitnesses" and "unfitnesses" from Clarke's *Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God.*


^{48}Ibid., 257-58.


^{51}Ibid., 351.

^{52}Ibid.

“promoting Christian knowledge in his parish in 1702.” Heitzenrater notes that the purpose of Samuel’s Epworth group revolved around praying, reading the Bible, and edifying one’s neighbor, activities not unlike those undertaken by the Holy Club. It is small wonder that John turned to Samuel in this matter.

But the letters reveal more. Not only did Samuel manifest a fatherly pride in the Oxford Holy Club by his praise “Valde Probo” written to his two sons, but he also identified himself with the purpose and origin of this society so strongly that he wrote in one place, “I hear my son has the honour of being styled the father of the Holy Club. If it be so, I am sure I must be the grandfather of it.”

C. Refusal of the Epworth Parsonage

In early October 1734, Samuel Wesley’s health was in decline, and the elderly pastor was eager that the future of the Epworth parsonage should be decided before his death. Quite naturally, his first choice for the position was “his eldest and favorite son,” Samuel Jr. But Samuel Jr. was already very much occupied, for he had recently “left his assistant-mastership at Westminister for the headmastership of Blundell’s School, Tiverton, in Devon.” And so on the 16th of that month, the ailing rector urged John to succeed him at Epworth just as he had already convinced John Whitelamb, his son-in-law, to take over the duties at Wroot. John thought the matter over for a time, and responded to his father in a letter the following month. He wrote:

It is now my unalterable resolution not to accept of Epworth living, if I could have it . . . The question is now whether I could do more good to others there or here, but whether I could do more good to myself; seeing wherever I can be most holy myself, there, I am assured, I can most promote holiness in others. But I am equally assured there is no place under heaven so fit for my improvement as Oxford.

Samuel was piqued, and he shot back a letter within five days. “It is not dear self, but the glory of God, and the different degrees of promoting it, which should be our main consideration,” he wrote. But the father’s appeal soon descended from these lofty heights, and he began to employ a strategy of guilt to motivate his reluctant son:

54 Ibid.
57 Stanley Ayling, John Wesley, (New York: Collins, 1979), 47.
58 Green, Young Mr. Wesley, 242.
59 Ayling, John Wesley, 57.
60 Ibid., 57.
62 Ibid., 395.
63 Ibid., 396.
We are not to fix our eye on our single point of duty, ... if you are not indifferent whether the labours of an aged father for above forty years in God's vineyard be lost, and the fences of it trodden down and destroyed ... in a fair way of bringing down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave; ... 64

John, realizing the seriousness of the situation, and that his father would not be easily put off, answered him very methodically in a lengthy letter of twenty six points. The thrust of his argument, not unlike his first response to Samuel, was that where he was most holy himself, there he could best promote holiness in others. Since he could be most holy at Oxford, there he should remain. 65 In other words, John believed that the life of a parish parson would “inhibit his ascetic discipline,” 66 and that his principal obligation was “to maintain himself in a corporate religious rule.” 67 Green has characterized this letter as leaving “an unpleasant taste” 68 evidenced by its “smugness and even self-satisfaction,” 69 while Moore sees it as just one more example, albeit a very good one, of Wesley’s “lifelong tactic of using reasoned argument to limit the effectiveness of his father’s authority.” 70 At any rate, the letter had its affect, for when Samuel wrote for the last time to John in January, he made no mention of the matter.

IV. The Third Period: Samuel as Reflected in John’s Later Letters

After Samuel Wesley’s death, his name seldom appeared in John’s writings. One such occurrence, however, is found in a letter to “John Smith” on 25 March 1747 where Wesley dryly noted that among his parishioners of Lincolnshire in 1742, he did far more good for them by preaching three days on his father’s tomb than he did by preaching three years in his pulpit. 71 Interestingly enough, Wesley saw continuity between his evangelistic success at Epworth and the earlier efforts of his father. In his journal he recorded:

At six I preached for the last time in Epworth churchyard to a vast multitude ... Nearly forty years did my father labour here, but he was little fruit of all his labour. I took some pains among this people too, and my strength also seemed spent in vain; but now the fruit appeared ... the seed, sown so long since, now sprung up, bringing forth repentance and remission of sins. 72

64Ibid., 397.
65Ibid., 404-405.
67Ibid.
68Green, The Young Mr. Wesley, 245.
69Ibid.
70Moore, John Wesley and Authority, 57.
71Baker, Works of Wesley, 26: 237. Wesley was driven to this odd manner of preaching by John Romley’s refusal of the Epworth pulpit.
To be sure, Wesley thought there were aspects of his father's pastoral style to be emulated, so he republished the latter's *Advice to a Young Clergyman* in 1735, and seven years later, in a letter to a gentleman, took note of Samuel's method of visitation in a very positive way. Moreover, concerning Samuel's Christian witness, John had the deepest respect. In a piece written in 1748, for example, John related that his father had not died 'unacquainted with the faith of the gospel, of the primitive Christian, or of our first Reformers," but for that at the time of his death, he had been comforted by a "clear sense of his acceptance with God." The dying Samuel revealed the source of such assurance to John, "The inward witness, son, the inward witness."

Although there are only a sprinkling of references to Samuel in the writings of this third period, they nevertheless give some indication of John's estimation of his father. These documents reveal that John enjoyed fond and tender memories of Samuel which are expressed not only in the high regard which he had for his father's ministerial skills, but also in the esteem in which he held the man.

**V. Conclusion**

Of the more than 160 letters which passed between John and Samuel, only 32 survive. Any study, therefore, which is based upon such a small fraction of the entire corpus must be tentative in its conclusions, and cautious in its interpretation. Indeed, it does not necessarily follow that the thirty-two pieces which have survived the vagaries of time and collection in any way epitomize the whole. Therefore, all that can be offered is a broad-stroke-assessment of the elder Wesley, and a speculative flight, based upon the trends discerned in the surviving correspondence, as to what the undiscovered letters might contain concerning the father's character and his relation to his son. When the reader keeps these caveats in mind, a number of items and questions yet emerge.

First of all, Samuel Wesley, as a convert from dissent, has been revealed by these letters as a staunch Anglican, zealous for the ways of his church which he believed to be in accord with the standard of scripture. Did Samuel's High Church Anglicanism influence John? Outler contends that "Wesley seems never to have felt the need to amend the basic ecclesiology which he had developed at Epworth and Oxford, ..." Can the father's influence, therefore, be discerned in John's strong conviction,
especially in the 1750's,\textsuperscript{78} that the Methodist societies are a part of the Anglican church and should not separate from it?

Second, since John Wesley attributed the rise of Methodism to the formation of the Holy Club at Oxford,\textsuperscript{79} and since, as the letters of the second period indicate, Samuel played such a supporting and encouraging role with respect to that society, might the elder Wesley have contributed in a significant way to the rise of Methodism? In other words, can Samuel's boast of having been the "grandfather"\textsuperscript{80} of the Holy Club (and by inference of Methodism as well) be taken seriously?

Third, Samuel Wesley's strengths were often intermingled with his weaknesses. The letters to John portray a man of deep and abiding principles, and of courage, ever ready to suffer the consequences of his moral choices. And yet such tenacity of conviction, when applied not to the self but to others, can often appear as unduly harsh. Thus, the rector of Epworth and Wroot was willing to apply "the most insignificant detail of prescribed practice in his parish without regard for the discomfort or inconvenience it caused his parishioners,"\textsuperscript{81} and he was also willing to sacrifice the friendship of his daughter, Hetty, on the same high altar of principle. Truly, one of Samuel's glaring faults was his inability to distinguish between stubbornness and a strength of conviction which could be both forgiving and redemptive. Interestingly enough, Green suggests a similarity between father and son on this score in the latter's exercise of a "penitential discipline"\textsuperscript{82} while in Georgia.

Fourth, although John turned down the Epworth living in a barrage of well reasoned arguments, the figure of the father loomed so large in his consciousness that he eventually recanted and offered to serve this parish. But Wesley's hesitancy here, as in other places, had already decided the issue, and the living was offered to another.\textsuperscript{83} Shortly after this, John forsook Oxford and its security, and volunteered for missionary service in Georgia. Thus, the son who had so championed his university and its benefits was now willing to leave its revered halls after his father's death. What prompted this change of heart? It is well known that Samuel Wesley was interested in the world-wide work of the church. In fact, extracts from the journal of the Georgia Trustees indicate that he "played a large role in sponsoring the Georgia mission."\textsuperscript{84} Samuel Wesley not only supported Oglethorpe's scheme, but he also had been in "correspondence with him

\textsuperscript{78}Baker, \textit{Works of Wesley}, 26: 609.
\textsuperscript{79}Jackson, \textit{Wesley's Works}, 8: 348.
\textsuperscript{80}Ayling, \textit{John Wesley}, 47.
\textsuperscript{81}Moore, \textit{Wesley and Authority}, 38.
\textsuperscript{82}Green, \textit{The Young Mr. Wesley}, 47.
\textsuperscript{83}Moore, \textit{Wesley and Authority}, 58.
\textsuperscript{84}Curnock, \textit{Journal}, 8: 283.
and the Trustees as early as 1732.” The Georgia mission, in other words, had been a “pet project” of Samuel’s. Thus, John Wesley’s mission to the Indians can be interpreted as “an act of penance on a grand scale,” to the ever-present Samuel. “The scholarly, poetic, volatile, unorganized and eminently unpredictable, figure of his father,” it can be argued, “must have elicited a response from young John that had elements of both mysterium tremendum and mysterium fascinans.”

The picture which has emerged from this brief study is multi-faceted, and suggests that the secondary literature needs to be attentive to an array of nuances embedded in the father-son correspondence. It is true that Samuel was obstinate, but he was also a man of high moral courage. He was domineering, but he could also be pastoral and supportive. The secondary literature is correct when it indicates that Samuel Wesley felt free to express anger at those who violated his strongly held beliefs, but it must move on from this preliminary observation to note that he felt equally free to express his love. In fact, on one occasion, Samuel wrote to John quite tenderly, “You know I can’t but love you, if you please, and if you think it worth your while an old father should love you.” Again, Samuel could be pedantic, but he also provided his family with a role model of scholarship and diligence. He was for all his obvious defects of character “a good husband and a conscientious pastor whose life had been passed in waters that were rarely untroubled.” He was not an ideal man, but a man with ideals, a flesh and blood man in a flesh and blood world, and John loved him.

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85 Ibid., 1: 30.
86 Moore, Wesley and Authority, 62.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 45.
89 Ibid.
91 Green, The Young Mr. Wesley, 246.