

**A DIFFICULT LOVE:  
MOTHER AS SPIRITUAL GUIDE IN THE  
WRITING OF SUSANNA WESLEY**

CLAIRE WOLFTEICH

In recently published letters to her children, Susanna Wesley (1669–1742) claims a vocation as a spiritual guide. She grounds this claim in her maternal love and responsibility; indeed, her vocation is forged in the practice of maternal love. The mother of John and Charles Wesley emerges as a compassionate but tough spiritual director and a fiercely loving parent. Her writings reveal her struggle both to love and to let go, two movements required by her Christian faith. She wrestled with the nature of divine and human love as she confronted her call to cherish her children and yet relinquish them to the care of a God whose ways are incomprehensible.

Susanna Wesley offers a model of spiritual guide which differs sharply from the more detached “spiritual paternity” and “spiritual maternity” practiced by some of the earliest Christian spiritual directors. The Desert Fathers and Mothers of the 4th through the 6th centuries, for example, sought to “beget” or “engender” others in the spiritual life. While they were addressed in Aramaic as “abba” (father) and “amma” (mother), parenthood was metaphorical for these early monks and nuns wandering in the wilderness of Egypt, Palestine, and Syria.

The image of spiritual paternity or maternity became a foundational model of spiritual direction in the Christian tradition. According to one author:

What distinguished the Christian guide in the early monastic context was the notion of fatherhood/motherhood in the Spirit. . . . Though the notion of spiritual fatherhood/motherhood may be found incidentally in other traditions, that notion is not the dominant image of the guide as it was for the early Christian monks and nuns. Thus fatherhood/motherhood—‘begetting in the Spirit’—is the distinctive character of Christian spiritual direction, particularly in the monastic context, compared with other traditions of spiritual direction.<sup>1</sup>

Spiritual parenthood is a foundational model for Christian spiritual direction. Ironically, the Desert Fathers and Mothers seem to have fostered a tradition of celibate parenthood. One can trace this tradition through later monasticism, and see remnants even in some Protestant movements. Christian spiritual direction developed primarily in monastic contexts, where the direc-

---

<sup>1</sup>(Sr.) Donald Corcoran, “Spiritual Guidance,” in McGinn et al., ed., *Christian Spirituality I: Origins to the Twelfth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 447.

tor of souls was called “father” or “mother.” St. Benedict begins his influential *Rule*, for example: “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice.”<sup>2</sup> We even find Protestant examples of celibate spiritual parenthood, as in Mother Ann Lee and Mother Eunice Bathrick, directors of the Shaker communities in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, the notion of celibate spiritual parenthood achieved prominence as a model of Christian spiritual direction, particularly in Catholic monasticism. Susanna Wesley provides an alternate model: the picture of a lay woman with a passionate attachment to her directees. Susanna, after all, was not a nun, but rather a married woman who gave birth to nineteen children, nine of whom died before the age of one. She knew the passion of maternal love and the grief of loss, and these human experiences shaped her spirituality and the spiritual guidance she offered her children.

Historians have yet to explore adequately lay spirituality, including the relation between faith and family. David Hempton notes: “The role of women, apart from preachers’ wives and colourful personalities, is virtually unrecorded, yet there were probably more women than men in eighteenth-century Methodism. . . . The influence of Methodism on family life is also under-researched.”<sup>4</sup> Susanna Wesley is both a preacher’s wife and a colorful personality; this article does not necessarily uncover the history of the average Methodist woman. Yet, I argue that Susanna Wesley’s writings do allow an uncommon look into the powerful spiritual and theological questions imbedded in lay experience, and the potential of this experience to shape Christian history. Indeed, Susanna clearly influenced the theology of sons John and Charles, and it is no surprise that love became the core of Methodist spirituality.

She is by far not the only mother to assume the role of spiritual director, but she is one of the few whose thought we can access in depth through her own writing. Augustine’s *Confessions*, for example, reveal the powerful influence of his mother Monica’s consuming love and spiritual fervor. We see Monica only through Augustine’s eyes. We read, for example, about Monica’s “too jealous love for her son”<sup>5</sup> and the pain that his spiritual wandering caused her: “She had brought up her children and had been in travail afresh each time she saw them go astray from you.”<sup>6</sup> We will hear interesting echoes of this jealous spiritual love in Susanna Wesley’s own writing to her children.

<sup>2</sup>*The Rule of Saint Benedict* (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, Minnesota, 1982), 15.

<sup>3</sup>See Suzanne Thurman, “‘Dearly Loved Mother Eunice’: Gender, Motherhood, and Shaker Spirituality,” in *Church History* 66, No. 4 (December 1997), 750–761.

<sup>4</sup>David Hempton, *Methodism and Politics in British Society 1750–1850* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1984), 13.

<sup>5</sup>Augustine, *Confessions*, V, viii.

<sup>6</sup>Augustine, *Confessions*, IX, ix.

Susanna's writing offers what we cannot find with Monica: an opportunity to explore the thought of a maternal spiritual director *in her own words*. I will focus primarily on the theological and spiritual understandings which emerge in her letters to her children.

Susanna wrote most of these letters to her three sons, who had left home for studies and ministry. The letters show Susanna to be engaged with the intellectual currents of her day. She emerges as a reflective and searching practical who can explicate Locke's philosophy, recommend the poetry of George Herbert, and cite the Psalms. Indeed, her intellectual pursuits spurred her own sense of mission and vocation, and helped to shape the theology she presented in her letters to her children. After reading a book about Danish missionaries in India, for example, Susanna defended her practice of leading uncanonical Sunday evening religious services in her husband's absence: "At last it came into my mind, though I am not a man nor a minister of the gospel, and so cannot be employed in such a worthy employment as they were; yet if my heart were sincerely devoted to God . . . I might do somewhat more than I do."<sup>7</sup> She shows here the independent spirit which imbued her childhood in a Dissenting home and which ironically allowed her to claim the Anglican faith at age twelve. Susanna's strong sense of independence and vocation, nurtured by her own reading and writing, strengthened her authority as a mother and spiritual director. As Wallace notes:

In her reading Susanna Wesley had again found support to pursue religious duty that at the same time involved innovation, dissent, and a measure of independence within a traditional role. Books helped to define her over against her father and her husband. To her children, even her classically educated sons destined for the priesthood, she was theological mentor.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting that Samuel Wesley, the ordained minister, seems less influential as a spiritual guide to his children. One may compare Susanna Wesley's intense domestic involvement with his rather detached, distant authority. Certainly, Susanna's spiritual primacy reflects cultural and religious teachings of the day. Both Puritanism and Anglicanism emphasized the mother's particularly important role in shaping piety. Writers such as Richard Baxter, a Dissenter friend of Susanna's father and an author she recommended to her son John, strengthened Susanna's motherly vocation to spiritual direction. Baxter, for example, wrote in *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* (1650):

Especially you, mothers, remember this; you are more with your children while they are little ones than their fathers, be you therefore still teaching them as soon as ever they are capable of learning. You cannot do God such eminent service yourselves as men, but you may train up children that may do it, and then you will have part of the comfort and

---

<sup>7</sup>Susanna Wesley to Samuel Wesley, 6 February 1712, cited in Charles Wallace, Jr., "'Some Stated Employment of Your Mind': Reading, Writing, and Religion in the Life of Susanna Wesley," *Church History* 58 (September 1989), 360.

<sup>8</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 360.

honour. . . . What a deal of pains you are at with the bodies of your children more than the fathers, and what do you suffer to bring them into the world; and will you not be at as much pains for saving their souls?"

Baxter's text shows the task which confronted women like Susanna Wesley: to claim a vocation from within a fairly traditional social role, to claim religious authority while not showing undue self-will or usurping male roles.

Susanna Wesley found her vocation most strongly in her role as mother. She presents a model of the spiritual guide as a fiercely loving mother. This model distinguishes her from both the more distant fatherly role of her time and the celibate "spiritual paternity" and "spiritual maternity" long practiced by influential Christian spiritual guides.

As Susanna wrote to her oldest son Samuel: "for I do not love distance or ceremony; there is more of love and tenderness in the name of mother than in all the complimentary titles in the world."<sup>10</sup> This maternal love—not distance or detached care—characterized Susanna's style of spiritual direction. She wrote in the epigraph to her "Religious Conference between Mother and Emilia": "I write unto you little children, of whom I travail in birth again, until Christ be formed in you."<sup>11</sup> She wrote to Sammy that she "cannot but speak something, since I love you as my own soul."<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, her love propelled her to speak much on spiritual matters to her children. When they were young, she assumed primary responsibility for their spiritual formation, meeting weekly with each child for individual religious instruction. When the children were temporarily dispersed to other homes after the Epworth rectory fire in 1709, Susanna fervently tried to keep them on the right path, as demonstrated by her 1709/10 catechetical letter to daughter Susanna (Suky) analyzing the Apostles' Creed. She continued to counsel her children even after they reached adulthood and left home, as seen in the letters to her sons Samuel, John, and Charles.

Her love of God and her maternal love, then, called her to the ministry of spiritual guidance. It is natural that love became central to her understanding of the spiritual life. Yet her experience of maternal love also led her to confront sharp theological questions about the relationship between love of God and human love. She boldly asked what it really means to love God, whether we can trust God, and how we finally can claim religious faith.

In a 1704 letter to Sammy, she wrote that the "highest and most noble part of Christian life . . . consists in loving God." To love God "with the full power and energy of the soul is the principal duty of a Christian and the complement of Christian perfection and happiness."<sup>13</sup> Susanna noted in her jour-

---

<sup>9</sup>Richard Baxter, *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, cited in John A. Newton, *Susanna Wesley and the Puritan Tradition in Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1968), 105–6.

<sup>10</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 73.

<sup>11</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 427.

<sup>12</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 73.

<sup>13</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 47.

nals too that God commands us to “love the Lord our God with all the heart, with all the mind, with all the soul, and with all the strength.”<sup>14</sup> Her emphasis on love is, of course, quite biblical. (She here paraphrased Mark 12:30 and the parallel in Luke 10:27–28.) In a 1725 letter to son John, she paraphrased 1 Corinthians 13:3: “Love to God and love to our neighbour, which often in scripture is called charity, is, or ought to be, the principle and rule of all our thoughts, words and actions with respect to either.”<sup>15</sup>

Susanna’s spiritual guidance certainly influenced her children, and indeed the very core of Methodist spirituality. We see in John Wesley’s own letters of spiritual counsel a similar emphasis on the priority of love. In a 1772 letter to Philothea Briggs, he called love “the whole of religion contracted to a point.”<sup>16</sup> Echoing his mother’s 1725 letter to him, he counseled Ann Loxdale in 1782 “frequently to read and meditate upon the 13th chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians. There is the true picture of Christian perfection! Let us copy after it with all our might”<sup>17</sup> In his tract entitled, *The Character of a Methodist*, which he quotes in his *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (1753), he stated: “A *Methodist* is one who loves the Lord his God with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength.”<sup>18</sup>

Clearly, Susanna guided her children toward an understanding of Christian spirituality which consisted most centrally in love. In Susanna’s spirituality, this love of God and of neighbor is not dispassionate. As she wrote in her journal, “This we may be assured of, that love is the strongest passion. . . .”<sup>19</sup> She painted a picture of a jealous God who loves us passionately, and in turn evokes in us a jealous love of the divine. In a 1725 letter to John, Susanna Wesley equated “zeal” and “jealously,” and described them as the natural product of love:

Zeal or jealousy is an effect of love; and the more intense the love is, the greater is our desire of the good and possession of what we love, and the more vigorously shall we strive to repel and exclude everything that is repugnant to the beloved object or may prevent our attainment or quiet enjoyment of what we so love.<sup>20</sup>

God’s jealousy is a necessary component of the overwhelming divine love for the creature. God zealously desires our good, and that good rests in our monogamous relationship with God. For this reason, God forbids idolatry. Susanna’s letter to John reads: “Almighty God is frequently in holy writ represented as zealous or jealous over us, lest we bestow that honour and love which is due to him on anything else. . . .”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 248.

<sup>15</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 121.

<sup>16</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 163.

<sup>17</sup>John and Charles Wesley, *Selected Writings and Hymns* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 163.

<sup>18</sup>John and Charles Wesley, *Selected Writings and Hymns*, 303.

<sup>19</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 248.

<sup>20</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 119.

<sup>21</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 119.

In turn, we should be zealous or jealous towards God. We should seek only that which pleases God, and should repel anything that would take us away from the enjoyment of God. Zeal and jealousy are even signs of the authenticity and strength of one's love. The Christian should be like Elijah: zealous or jealous for the Lord God of hosts (1 Kings 19:14). Susanna wrote: "Zeal with respect to God consists in an awful regard and tender concern for his glory and will, and it ever holds proportion with the degree of our love towards him."<sup>22</sup>

As adults, Susanna's sons turned to her for theological and spiritual conversation. John Wesley, for example, solicited this discussion of zeal and jealousy. Undoubtedly, Susanna and her sons John and Charles mutually influenced one another's thought. This is apparent in John Wesley's *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, in which he, like his mother, connected love and zeal. According to John, one is not dead to sin until sin is separated from one's soul. "And in that instant he lives the full life of love." We are to wait for this change not "in careless indifference, or indolent inactivity; but in vigorous, universal obedience, in a zealous keeping of all the commandments. . . ."<sup>23</sup>

It seems quite appropriate that Susanna and John exchanged ideas on love and zeal. Susanna's love for her children was, after all, zealous. Her maternal love involved the intersection of the two divine commands: to love God above all things and to love the neighbor as the self. Loving her children meant showing "awful regard and tender concern" for them, and particularly for the care of their souls. Love of God meant jealously guarding the will of God for these children, each of which is "a talent committed to your trust," as Susanna wrote in her journal.<sup>24</sup> Susanna recognized that zeal can be dangerous; when unmoderated, it can be "the most pernicious thing in nature."<sup>25</sup> There is a fine line, however, between pernicious zeal and the zeal required to win the souls of children for God. In her important 1732 essay on religious education, Susanna wrote:

Whenever a child is corrected, it must be conquered. . . . And when the will of a child is totally subdued . . . it is brought to revere and stand in awe of the parents. . . .

I insist upon conquering the will of children betimes, because this is the only [strong and rational] foundation of a religious education. . . . when this is thoroughly done, then a child is capable of being governed by the reason [and piety] of its parent[s], till its own understanding comes to maturity.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 119.

<sup>23</sup>John and Charles Wesley, *Selected Writings and Hymns*, 335.

<sup>24</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 246.

<sup>25</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 120.

<sup>26</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 370.

Self-will is the root of all sin and unhappiness; indeed, she even defined religion as “nothing else than the doing the will of God.”<sup>27</sup> To jealously love God, then, is to seek the will of God above all things and to destroy self-will, which vies against God to win the soul. To love her children fiercely, she needed first to root out their self-will, cultivate their obedience to her, and finally transfer that obedience to God.

Susanna’s emphasis on love and obedience was characteristic of evangelical Protestants in 17th and 18th century Britain and New England. Historian Philip Greven writes: “Love and fear evoke some of the central and recurrent themes of evangelicalism and of the fundamental patterns of nurture, socialization, and discipline that marked evangelical families with common experiences and common convictions generation after generation.”<sup>28</sup> Susanna Wesley’s child-rearing surely reflected this emphasis on love and fear. Greven is, of course, sharply critical of evangelical child-rearing patterns and the theology which underlies them. He singled out Susanna Wesley, citing her as an example of the repressive evangelical parent who rigidly controls her children in order to destroy their sense of self and cultivate obedience to God.<sup>29</sup> Such arguments raise questions about whether Susanna Wesley can be regarded as a model spiritual guide or mother. Her zealous maternal love, fueled by her love of God, has been considered harsh or even abusive. Wallace, however, points out the strong influence of John Locke on Susanna Wesley, noting more moderate dimensions of both Locke’s and Wesley’s thought on child-rearing.<sup>30</sup>

In any case, Susanna Wesley considered maternal love to be a heavy and all-consuming responsibility. Love was difficult work. Susanna Wesley did this work under trying circumstances, enduring grief, poverty, her husband’s imprisonment for debt, the devastating rectory fire, her own physical ailments, and the ceaseless, methodical routines of domestic life. At times, Susanna might have longed to be a nun in the desert:

Were I permitted to choose a state of life . . . I would humbly choose, and beg that I might be placed in such a station wherein I might have daily bread with moderate care, without so much hurry, and distraction; and that I might have more leisure to retire from the world, without injuring my \_\_\_\_ (?husband) or children.<sup>31</sup>

Yet she could not retire from the world, nor could she separate her vocation as a mother from her call to spiritual guidance.

There is, however, an internal contradiction in Susanna’s writings, which, of course, were not intended as systematic theological treatises. Despite her

---

<sup>27</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 370.

<sup>28</sup>Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 21.

<sup>29</sup>See Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*, 13, 36–38, 44, 48.

<sup>30</sup>See Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 368.

<sup>31</sup>Susanna’s journal, Headingly MSS, A.f. 17f., cited in Newton, 100.

own experience and theological conviction, she sometimes portrayed perfect love as dispassionate, thus establishing an unattainable model for herself. In a letter to John regarding John's difficult relationship with a student in his care, Susanna wrote:

Never trouble yourself to inquire whether he loves you or not: if you can persuade him to love God, he will love you as much as is necessary; if he love not God his love is of no value. But be that as it will, we must refer all things to God, and be as indifferent as we possibly can be in all matters wherein the great enemy, self, is concerned.<sup>32</sup>

And in God's pure love: "No mixture of interest! No byends or selfish regards. . . . he can gain nothing by us, nor can we offer him anything that is not already his own. He can lose nothing by losing us. . . ." <sup>33</sup>

Yet her previous writings about God would imply that, indeed, God loses everything by losing us! How can one love and not suffer at the loss of the beloved? Susanna here seems to discount her belief in a passionate, jealous God and her own experience of love. Susanna's love of her children was hardly dispassionate or indifferent. It was, rather, zealous, like the God she had once described. Moreover, her love was not devoid of her own interest. She needed her children, desired their visits, even manipulated them on occasion. For example, she seems to give John a guilt trip when she wrote in 1727: "Whether you could see me die without any motion of grief I know not; perhaps you could."<sup>34</sup> A widow after the death of Samuel Wesley, Sr., in 1735, she sometimes reversed roles, seeking spiritual guidance from her sons as a child does from its mother. She wrote to Charles three years before her death: "I am in a state of great temptation and want to talk with you about many things. I need your direction and instruction how to act in the present situation. . . ." <sup>35</sup> She must struggle to let go of her sons for God's ministry while she also craved their presence and spiritual care:

he [John Wesley] never speaks in my hearing without my receiving some spiritual benefit; but his visits are seldom and short, for which I never blame him, because I know he is well employed, and, blessed be God, hath great success in his ministry. But, my dear Charles, still I want either him or you, for indeed in the most literal sense I am become a little child and want continual succour.<sup>36</sup>

Susanna wavered in her image of God and her understanding of divine love. Her writing at times described an involved, passionate divine love that reflected her own experience of human love. Other texts revert to a more distant, dispassionate God. This theological spectrum likely paralleled her own struggle as a spiritual guide to both love children intensely and to let them go into God's keeping and God's ministry.

---

<sup>32</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 165.

<sup>33</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 166.

<sup>34</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 138.

<sup>35</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 180.

<sup>36</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 180.

Susanna's letters reveal her struggle with letting go. She posed the question: if love is good, why does God require us to let go of those we love? More fundamentally, she hinted at the question: what does it really mean to love God? And, perhaps more to the point, how do we really know that God loves us and deserves our trust? Susanna was certain of her love for her children. She knew that any mother who loves her children does not want them to suffer. This seems to be a basic element of love. Why, then, would a loving God permit her children to suffer? This is the question of theodicy, and it is personal, poignant, wrenching when it appears in Susanna's letters. Susanna's experience of maternal love led her to question, if briefly, God's love.

We see only glimpses of this doubt, but when it surfaces it is an aching struggle to trust God's plan rather than her own desires for her children. Her maternal love rebelled against a divine love which could permit unwarranted human suffering. She wrote in a 1727 letter to son John:

I often revolve the state of my family and the wants of my children over in my mind. And though one short reflection on the sins of my youth and the great imperfection of my present state solves all the difficulty of Providence relating to myself, yet when I behold them struggling with misfortunes of various kinds, some without sufficiency of bread, in the most literal sense, all destitute of the conveniences or comforts of life, it puts me upon the expostulation of David, "Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly, but these sheep, what have they done? Though thus the tenderness of a mother pleads their cause, yet I dare not dispute God's justice, wisdom, or goodness."<sup>37</sup>

She dared not dispute God's justice because, as she reminded her son John, "God is infinitely just . . . he is justice itself."<sup>38</sup> Yet her children's suffering raised a flicker of doubt about God's justice. How did she resolve this doubt? Ultimately, she resolved it in trust, not in knowledge of God. Her questions are valid; they do not disappear in her faith. Her faith rather lay in the tension between her human questions and the God whom she trusts to be a jealous, if baffling, lover. Susanna wrote to John: "For my part, after many years' search and inquiry I still continue to pay my devotions to an unknown God. I cannot know him. I dare not say I love him—only this, I have chose him for my only happiness, my all, my only God, in a word, for my God."<sup>39</sup>

Susanna showed trust in God as she coped with the death of her beloved, first-born son Sammy in 1739. She admitted to her son Charles that she did not understand God's ways: "his ways of working are to myself incomprehensible and ineffable!" Moreover, she felt that her great love for Sammy might draw her away from the love of God. She writes: "Your brother was exceeding dear to me in his life, and perhaps I've erred in loving him too well. I once thought it impossible for me to bear his loss, but none knows what they can bear till they are tried." Yet Susanna seemed able to live in the unknow-

---

<sup>37</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 131.

<sup>38</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 163.

<sup>39</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 161.

ing, giving Sammy over to God and gaining comfort from God in the midst of her grief and increased economic insecurity: "Upon the first hearing of your brother's death, I did immediately acquiesce in the will of God without the least reluctance. . . . I rejoice in having a comfortable hope of my dear son's salvation. . . . Why then should I mourn?"<sup>40</sup>

In short, Susanna's faith prevails. She somehow was able to trust in the love of a God she could not see, even in the face of her love for the son she once could see: "God by my child's loss had called me to a firmer dependence on himself. That, though my son was good, he was not my God. . . ." <sup>41</sup> Susanna Wesley is a practical theologian, a student of "practical divinity."<sup>42</sup> Faith in this unknown or "altogether inaccessible"<sup>43</sup> God changes our practice, turning us into thankful people who accept God even when God does not meet our expectations. Susanna wrote to John: "By faith I do not mean an assent only to the truths of the gospel concerning him, but such as assent as influences our practice, as makes us heartily and thankfully accept him for our God and Saviour upon his own conditions. No faith below this can be saving."<sup>44</sup>

Susanna's spirituality has a strong apophatic dimension.<sup>45</sup> God cannot be fully known in this life, and so we must be content to rest in the unknowing and in the glimpses of God afforded us by faith in Jesus Christ. Moreover, this faith does not always bring feelings of assurance and joy; our own faith can remain, to some degree, hidden to us. She put a damper on Charles' enthusiasm following his conversion experience, when she counselled him in 1738: "'tis one thing to have faith and another thing to be sensible we have it. Faith is the fruit of the Spirit and is the gift of God, but to feel or be inwardly sensible that we have true faith requires a further operation of God's Holy Spirit."<sup>46</sup> Yet her response to Charles stemmed from her own apophatic spirituality. The Christian life involves the practice of trust in God, even when we have not seen or felt assurance of God's love. Susanna Wesley arrived at this conviction with some struggle, through her own maternal experience, but it became a cornerstone of the guidance she gave to others.

---

<sup>40</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 179.

<sup>41</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 179–80.

<sup>42</sup>See Susanna's references to "practical divinity" in her letters to son John and daughter Suky, in Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 106, 418.

<sup>43</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 162.

<sup>44</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 162.

<sup>45</sup>One can distinguish apophatic spirituality from cataphatic spirituality. Cataphatic spirituality is a more "positive" spirituality which relies on images of God and the felt presence of the divine. Cataphatic spirituality offers a path to God which emphasizes the presence of God in all creation. Apophatic spirituality by contrast is a more "negative" spirituality which emphasizes the unknowability of God and the inability of any image to contain God. Apophatic spirituality, then, incorporates the experience of the absence of God but offers a path to God through dark unknowing.

<sup>46</sup>Wallace, *Susanna Wesley*, 177.