

THE FIRST FAMILY VALUES OF METHODISM: THE WESLEYS

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Over the last decade or so, people of faith have been engaged in lively debates over “family values,”¹ and Methodists have been no exception. If this is such an important aspect of Christianity, what did John Wesley have to say about it? What were his family values? In many ways, the “family values” of the Wesleys were like those of other 18th-century English families. That is, they were not uniquely Methodist. On the other hand, because of the Wesleys’ Puritan roots mixed with the Methodist focus on discipline, their values were somewhat distinctive and included the following: strict discipline of children, a preference for home schooling, an emphasis on religious practices in the home, valuing God above one’s “traditional” family, and the redefinition of one’s primary family as the Methodist family. Let us examine the formation of each of those five values in the life and thinking of Methodism’s founder, John Wesley.

John’s first family values came from his parents. Susanna in particular is widely believed to have had a significant influence on her son. Raised in a Puritan home, she taught those same values to her children, despite her later affiliation with the Church of England.² Her father, Samuel Annesley, a Nonconformist minister, taught that families were little churches and as such should be well-disciplined. His library included a number of books on family religion and instruction of children. Surely his large household had to be kept in good order. Susanna was the last of his twenty-five children, born in 1669, when Samuel was fifty years old. The most significant story from Susanna’s childhood was regarding her decision to leave the dissenting church of her father and convert to the Church of England at the young age of twelve.³ While there was some tension at the time, her father was said to respect her decision. He had always taught her to be loyal to her own conscience, which Puritans believed was illumined by God.

Still, she remained close to him throughout her life, some say his favorite

¹Although most Americans define “family values” as any important values learned in the family, for this paper, family values will be understood as those values related to the family, regardless of where they were learned.

²John A. Newton, *Susanna Wesley and the Puritan Tradition in Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1968), 15.

³Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley: The Mother of John and Charles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 13-16.

daughter, and she named her first child after him.⁴ Some might see her “conversion” as an act of rebellion, but in other ways, it was an act of moderation. She was leaving the dissenting group, by definition rebellious, and joining the more socially acceptable Church of England. Perhaps it was the life of rebellion that she did not like.⁵ Still, a decision of that magnitude at such a young age indicates an unusual independence of mind, especially surprising for a woman of her day.⁶

Susanna made another important decision early in life, marrying Samuel Wesley when she was only nineteen. He was twenty-six.⁷ Perhaps she was overly anxious to leave her father’s home and take up with a man who shared her religious beliefs, because in many ways, that decision was a mistake. For the otherwise comfortable and independent Susanna, it meant a life of poverty, debt, and obedience, as well as a great deal of sadness. Most of her years were spent bearing children and watching nine of them die. Only ten lived to maturity.⁸ Her health was never very good and the location of their home did not help. Samuel and Susanna spent most of their married life serving a parish at Epworth, a desolate and swampy area, common breeding grounds for malaria and other infections.⁹

Still, Susanna bore it all, and kept busy raising her children and running the home. She did not always follow the typical submissive wifely role expected in her day. The most well known example is of a disagreement with, and then separation from Samuel, over who should be king. He left the house and did not return for about six months, and then only after he had heard of a fire that had burned most of the house, which he thought may have included his beloved books. Susanna was very upset over the separation, writing to friends, complaining about his “denial of her conjugal rights”¹⁰ and saying she was thinking of leaving him. She saw no way of reconciling, though she truly wanted him to come home. She simply would not compromise her beliefs.¹¹ To one confidante, she wrote, “I’m willing to let him quietly enjoy his opinions, he ought not to deprive me of my little liberty of conscience.”¹² Despite the prescriptions of her day regarding obedient wives, she felt a woman’s conscience was one thing that was her own. In other ways, she willingly obeyed him, or at least made a show of it. For

⁴Newton, 61.

⁵Newton, 60-64.

⁶Frederick E. Maser, *Susanna Wesley* (Lake Junaluska, N.C.: United Methodist Church, Commission on Archives and History, 1976), 4.

⁷Dallimore, 27,

⁸Dallimore, 35-37.

⁹Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage: In England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 79.

¹⁰Frank Baker, “Susanna Wesley: Puritan, Parent, Pastor, Protagonist, Pattern,” in *Women in New Worlds: Historical Perspectives on the Wesleyan Tradition*, vol. 2, ed. Rosemary Skinner Keller, Louise L. Queen, and Hilah F. Thomas (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 117.

¹¹Dallimore, 48.

¹²Charles Wallace, Jr. ed., *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 35-36.

example, she always addressed him as "Sir" or "My Master," but they always seemed to get along best when they maintained their separate spheres, his the parish and hers the home.¹³

In the home, Susanna saw that everything was done with discipline and in order. She was a highly methodical person, best exemplified in her child-rearing.¹⁴ She preferred the older, Calvinist model in combination with the newer, more lenient philosophy of Locke. The older model was common among lower middle class Puritans, based on their belief in original sin.¹⁵ Although she believed in using reason and understanding to teach children, she also believed that each child's will should be conquered from the start. If lenience was the first principle, she believed it would be difficult to initiate strictness later.¹⁶ It is likely that she read Locke because some of the specific methods she cited were also stated plainly by him. For instance, both suggest using a child's speech abilities as a measure of when to begin formal education. And while considered more lenient for his day, even he believed in breaking a child's will.¹⁷

Some say her method should be replicated today,¹⁸ but for most, it is much too harsh. In her own day though, her methods would have been considered moderate. For most children, floggings would have been common, but they seemed rare in the Wesley home. Some parents used strange and painful practices such as putting children in iron collars for good posture. Susanna did nothing like that. The typical treatment of children was probably not far from the depictions in Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*.¹⁹ These cruelties aside, Susanna was still clear and firm in her rules. She said she taught the children, from the age of one, to "fear the rod, and to cry softly," because she did not want the annoying sound of crying to be heard in the house. She said they "lived in as much quietness as if there had not been a child among them,"²⁰ while in reality, the Wesley home was teeming with children most of the time. Loud talking and playing were not allowed, although card games were played on occasion. Although she advised her grown children to spend no more time in recreation than in private religious duties,²¹ she seemed to allow little if any time for recreation in her own home. Her opinion of more lenient parents was that they were not kind, but cruel, doing the devil's work by condemning their children to hell.²² To Susanna, the children's salvation was in the balance and it was her parental duty to assure their eternal, not

¹³Newton, 85.

¹⁴Maser, 15.

¹⁵Stone, 63-67.

¹⁶Newton, 113-14.

¹⁷Baker, 117-18.

¹⁸Rebecca Lamar Harmon, *Susanna: Mother of the Wesleys* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 64.

¹⁹Maldwyn Edwards, *Family Circle* (London: Epworth Press, 1949), 63.

²⁰Edwards, 63.

²¹Newton, 55.

²²Newton, 114-16.

just temporal, lives. Strict discipline was her method.

As a grown man, John once asked her to write down her philosophy of child-rearing. He later quoted her in a number of documents, some of which were published, such as, *Thoughts on Educating Children and Family Religion*. Her eight stated rules were (1) that a child should not be beaten for a wrong if s/he confessed, (2) that all wrongs should be punished, (3) that a child should be beaten only once for each infraction, (4) that obedience should be rewarded, (5) that even failed attempts at being good should be praised, (6) that the private property of each family member should be respected, (7) that all promises should be kept, and (8) that all children should be taught to read, even girls.²³ There were other rules as well, such as her belief that children should eat whatever is served and that they should not snack.²⁴ The content is of interest, but even more, it is clear she was both intentional and methodical in her parenting, and was careful about consistency. Overall, she was pleased with the results.

She also believed it was important to monitor influences from outside the home. She isolated her children from the other children in the parish, whom she thought were rough and crude.²⁵ She was very upset when, due to a fire, the children were forced to spend almost a year in the “wild” homes of friends and relatives, where some of the children learned “a clownish accent and many rude ways.”²⁶ She then went to great lengths to reform them, starting the practice of weekly meetings with each one individually: Molly on Mondays, Hetty on Tuesdays, Nancy on Wednesdays, Jacky on Thursdays, and so on.²⁷

Educational facilities were available in Epworth, but they were supposedly “primitive.”²⁸ They may have also been expensive and not worth the cost. As a cheaper and a more popular alternative, Samuel Jr. was placed with a tutor for elementary education, but that did not last a year because the tutor was discovered to be a heavy drinker. Susanna decided to educate him and the others herself.²⁹ In her typically methodical manner, she devised her own system of education and religious training. She believed religious homes should be “schools of piety and nurseries of the church.”³⁰ She saw the purpose of all education to turn the child away from self-will, pride and love of the world and toward meekness, resignation and love of God. To this end, she created a classroom in the home where all of the children over the age of five spent six hours a day.³¹ She even wrote her own manuals out of which they read. She was proud that her entire life was dedicated to her chil-

²³Wallace, 373-73.

²⁴Dallimore, 8.

²⁵Maser, 14.

²⁶Baker, 120.

²⁷Newton, 122.

²⁸Baker, 118.

²⁹Harmon, 55-56.

³⁰John Kirk, *The Mother of the Wesleys: A Biography* 6th ed. (London: Jarrold, 1876), 37.

³¹Newton, 120.

dren, which she considered rare among mothers. She once wrote, "No one can without renouncing the world in the most literal sense observe my method: and there are few, if any, that would entirely devote above twenty years of the prime of life in hope to save the souls of their children."³²

At various points between ages eleven and fourteen, the boys left home for boarding school at great expense to the family, but this was the only way to get a quality education that would prepare a young man for a professional career. Since Samuel Sr. was clergy, it was natural that the sons would pursue the same occupation, a kind of family business.³³ On the other hand, the family could never have afforded similar educations for the girls too, and practically speaking, there was no need. In the 18th century girls had only to learn housekeeping skills in preparation for marriage and motherhood, all of which could be learned at home. What was unique was that the Wesley girls were extremely well educated, even if at home. Susanna believed that girls needed education beyond housekeeping, minimally so they would be prepared to teach their own children, some of whom might be boys. She knew the societal limitations of her gender. She wrote of being deeply touched by the stories of Danish missionaries which one of the girls had read to her as part of a reading lesson. After hearing their accounts, she wanted to do more for God, but due to her limitations as a woman, resolved to begin with her own children. She wrote that since she was not a man, she could not "be engaged in such a worthy employment as they were."³⁴ Still, she valued her role as a mother and defined it as spiritual guide for her children. She trained her daughters to do the same. Some say she trained them well for life in a man's world, teaching them to have firm principles.³⁵ Others say this was good training for her sons, but hindered her daughters' ability to achieve happiness.³⁶

Susanna's participation in the education of her children did not stop at adulthood. She spent her whole life writing to them, and often in the form of theological treatises. She felt very comfortable arguing theology with her Oxford educated sons, and they found her to be a worthy teacher. It is interesting to note that she was a different person with her grandchildren: she doted on them. John once said, "My own mother, who governed her children so well, could never govern one grandchild," but agreed that he knew no grandmother who could.³⁷

In some ways, husband Samuel resembled Susanna and reinforced her influence. Like Susanna, he too was independently minded. He was also concerned about the children's education, especially his sons. Since the boys

³²Edwards, 77.

³³Mary Abbott, *Family Ties: English Families 1540-1920* (London: Routledge, 1993), 96.

³⁴Baker, 121.

³⁵Baker, 2.

³⁶Maser, 13.

³⁷Maser, 29.

knew Latin and Greek before entering Oxford, and Susanna knew neither language, it is assumed that he taught these subjects to them.³⁸ A letter from Samuel to Samuel Jr. away at school, hints at this: "I will promise you so much secrecy that even your Mother shall know nothing but what you have a mind she should; for which reason it may be convenient you should write to me still in Latin."³⁹

In most ways though, he was the opposite of Susanna. Where she was quiet, modest and restrained overall, Samuel had an explosive temper and a touch of personal vanity.⁴⁰ When Hetty, one of his daughters became pregnant before marriage, he not only lost his temper, but never forgave her despite her pleas, and wrote only cruel letters to her thereafter.⁴¹ Although this is the only documented case of unrelenting unkindness, he was never close to any of his daughters, with the exception of Mary who was physically handicapped, so she spent a lot of time with him at home. It was his sons he best understood.⁴² Despite Susanna's unmistakable impact on John, it seems that he inherited his father's personality, while Charles was more like his mother. Susanna knew how different they were. She once wrote to John, "Tis an unhappiness almost peculiar to our family, that your father and I seldom think alike."⁴³ In addition to the famous disagreement about the monarch, they disagreed about child-rearing practices. Susanna's first rule was that children should not be beaten for offenses to which they had confessed. Samuel disagreed. Confession or no, he felt the child needed to be taught a lesson.⁴⁴

Their greatest marital difficulty was his inability to handle their finances. During one particularly hard period, Susanna's brother suggested to his sister that she leave Samuel, but she wrote back saying that she had taken him for better or for worse, and that she would stand by him, even through poverty.⁴⁵ He was loyal to her as well. Once while Samuel was in debtor's prison for a few months, Susanna sent him her wedding rings so he could pay his fines and be released. He refused to use them and sent them back, deciding instead to make the most of his time by ministering to his fellow prisoners.⁴⁶

Samuel Jr., the oldest child, was not particularly close to John, and died at the age of forty-nine, so relatively little has been written about him and his family. There are a number of references to his wife's being unfriendly or at least not close to the other Wesley children, but there is no indication of unhappiness in their own home or between her and Samuel. We do know

³⁸Dallimore, 81.

³⁹Kirk, 27.

⁴⁰Newton, 71.

⁴¹Dallimore, 117-19.

⁴²Maldwyn Edwards, *Sons to Samuel* (London: Epworth Press, 1961), 4.

⁴³Newton, 84.

⁴⁴Newton, 85.

⁴⁵Dallimore, 96-104.

⁴⁶Dallimore, 68.

that Samuel Jr. sent money home out of his salary, helping to support the family his father could not. Samuel also paid for Charles' education entirely, and helped with John's. Evidently, he felt both loyalty and a duty toward his family of origin, even after embarking on his own.⁴⁷

There were seven sisters that lived to maturity. Much has been said about their somewhat tragic lives due predominantly to bad marriages. It may be that all but one of the girls were widowed and/or deserted by their husbands, turning to John and Charles for support.⁴⁸ The only exception was Mary, who died after only one year of marriage. Perhaps it was difficult to find suitable husbands, living in the isolation of Epworth.⁴⁹ It may also have been that the children were raised to be independently minded like their parents, which may not have served the girls as well as the boys in that society.

Through all the stories of failed marriages, abandoned families and repeated illness, one also notes an enduring commitment between the siblings, a general loyalty to family and a special willingness on the part of the boys to care for the girls when in need. Even amidst an explosive situation around Hetty's pre-marital pregnancy, John tried to mend family ties, and Molly took Hetty's part, saying that she should not be made to marry against her will a man she did not love.⁵⁰ Susanna's liberty of conscience is also found in the daughters, such as when Sukey was unwilling to return to her abusive husband. While independence was evident, so was Christian compassion. Patty's acceptance of her husband's pregnant lover would be shocking in any era. Susanna's loyalty, conscience, and compassion were replicated in the lives of her children, seen in the ways they treated each other.

Charles warrants special attention, partly due to his intensely close relationship with John, and also because of his somewhat unique view of family and family values. First of all, Charles wanted to get married. Oglethorpe once recommended that he marry, saying Charles had a social temperament, and would find marriage more a help for his salvation, than a hindrance.⁵¹ Charles thought, though, that marriage would be the most significant act in his life, making it heaven or hell. Almost at first sight, he suspected that Sarah Gwynne would create for him a heaven. Sarah was eighteen years younger than Charles, but significant age differences were common in that time. They courted for eighteen months before marrying. At first, Sarah's mother was not happy with the match, but Charles persuaded her that he would make a good husband and provider, so she eventually gave her blessing, which Charles considered a sign from God.⁵² He also needed the bless-

⁴⁷Harmon, 143-6.

⁴⁸Pamela D. Couture, *Blessed Are the Poor? Women's Poverty, Family Policy, and Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 131.

⁴⁹A. M. Chreitzberg, "Epworth and the Wesleys," *Methodist Quarterly Review* 35:1 (1892), 155.

⁵⁰Harmon, 110.

⁵¹Frank Baker, *Charles Wesley: As Revealed by His Letters* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), 54.

⁵²John R. Tyson, *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 313.

ing of his brother, with whom he had made a pact some years before. They had agreed never to marry without the consent of the other. At one of their meetings, Charles asked John to suggest three women who he felt would make a suitable partner for him, and Sarah's name was among them. Charles chose Sarah, and John heartily approved.⁵³

Once married, they spent much time together. She even traveled with him until they had children. Charles was determined to be married to both his wife and his work, so she promised that she would let him continue to itinerate. Whether together or apart, they prayed with and for each other every afternoon at five o'clock.⁵⁴ They managed to keep in touch through letters. In fact, a full half of his extant correspondence is to her.⁵⁵ Many of his letters indicate his guilty feelings about not being home more. In his absence though, he encouraged her to pursue her own interests intellectually and spiritually, as his mother had. She wrote back with news of the children, their growth, teeth lost, illnesses, etc.⁵⁶

Eventually, his health, along with what must have been a strong desire to stay home, forced him to travel less and less. Sarah had numerous pregnancies, and as five of the babies died, he did not want her alone with that physical and emotional burden. Two sons and a daughter lived to adulthood, and as they grew, Charles wanted to be home to help with their musical training as well as their spiritual development.⁵⁷ In regard to their education, in some ways Charles was like his mother. He did not want his children to be exposed to what he called, "the corruptions" of other children, so outside relationships were discouraged. For that reason, he decided to educate them at home.⁵⁸

In some of Charles' hymns, he indicated an attitude toward child-rearing similar to his mother's. In practice though, he was inconsistent. Maybe due to his age, which was fifty-one at her birth, or maybe due to different gender expectations, he seems to have been somewhat harder on his daughter, emphasizing strict self-discipline and regular study. His sons were clearly gifted and probably temperamental musicians, therefore harder to control. Overall though, he preferred a gentler approach. While trying to instill discipline in all of his children, he also claimed to appreciate the value of fun and play.⁵⁹ He wanted to be both father and friend to his children.⁶⁰

It turned out that the boys' musical talent was both a blessing and a curse. Charles was happy that they were talented, but also came under fire from

⁵³Baker, 59.

⁵⁴Tyson, 320-338.

⁵⁵Baker, 3.

⁵⁶Tyson, 337-44.

⁵⁷Baker, 104-9.

⁵⁸Phillip Olleson, "The Wesleys at Home: Charles Wesley and his Children," *Methodist History* 36:3 (April 1998): 144.

⁵⁹Olleson, 143.

⁶⁰Tyson, 356.

John and other Methodists for exposing his sons to the musical world with its corrupting influences. Charles responded by saying that he held concerts and recitals at home so he could monitor not only the quality of the music, but the musicians as well, reminding that musical talent was from God. John disagreed with Charles' methods, but Charles continued, traveling with them so they could play for important musicians and composers.⁶¹ Charles eventually relocated the entire family to Bristol, partly to provide the best musical education and opportunities for his sons.⁶²

In the end, both of his sons departed from Methodism, Charles Jr. becoming a secular musician and Samuel a Roman Catholic, attracted by their rich liturgy. Samuel also became an adulterous and abusive alcoholic. At age forty-three, he started a relationship with his fifteen-year-old housekeeper, with whom he went on to have four children, in addition to the three he had with his wife. One may blame it on Charles' lenient parenting philosophy as some scholars have done, or cite the influence of music and the secular world as John did. Some recent scholars attribute Samuel's behavior to what may have been an undiagnosed manic-depressive illness.⁶³ We may never know what went wrong in the Charles Wesley home, but it was very different than the home in which he grew up. Charles and Sarah had a better marriage than any of the Wesley clan. On the other hand, Charles said he valued discipline, but could not instill it in his children the way his mother did. He tried to improve upon what he saw in his father by being present for his children and providing for them financially, but that did not seem to help. There may have been any number of social and psychological forces at work, but we do know that Charles was disappointed with his children, and John was critical of his methods. The raising of moral and disciplined children was clearly a Methodist family value that Charles was unable to achieve. Charles' disappointment only serves to highlight that this was indeed a value, even though he differed with John about how it should be done, and then failed in its pursuit.

Despite John's dedication to his own family, he had some curious notions about a few aspects of family. Most clearly, he was confused about marriage. Until his own marriage, he seemed convinced that celibacy was the best option for him, indeed for all Christians, if possible. He believed that only through celibacy could a person truly love God and commit his/her life to God completely, without competition.⁶⁴

He traced the development of his thoughts on celibacy back through his childhood. As a boy, he believed he would never find a woman like his mother. He thought that as a young man, he would not have the means to

⁶¹Baker, 113.

⁶²Olleson, 147.

⁶³Olleson, 145-52.

⁶⁴Bufford W. Coe, *John Wesley and Marriage* (Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 1996), 61.

support a wife. He also supported the early church rule for priests, and since he was a priest, he thought he should not marry. At the same time, he criticized the Roman Catholic prohibition of marriage for priests because it was a later addition to “pure” Christianity, created out of economic greed in the church rather than dedication to the service of God.⁶⁵ He agreed with the mystics that marriage is a lesser state, and he cited Paul to support his opinion that marriage was a distraction from the Christian life. He even encouraged married couples to use abstinence as a devotional tool periodically, but never for too long, so as to avoid “unclean thoughts.”⁶⁶ Overall, he felt marriage was too expensive and would limit his ability to give to the poor, and that it would hinder his ability to itinerate and lead the Methodist movement.⁶⁷ In fact, he discouraged all his preachers from marrying so that they could travel more freely.⁶⁸ Eventually, he came to the position that celibacy, although right for him, was not necessarily good for everyone, occasionally referring to the “happy few” who had remained single. He even gave advice on how to avoid sexual temptation, encouraging prayer and asceticism, and even avoiding friendships with persons of the opposite sex, despite his own plethora of women friends.⁶⁹

His own marriage did not change his opinion for long, if at all. A year before his death, he said that, “I married because I needed a home in order to recover my health; and I did recover it. But I did not seek happiness thereby, and I did not find it”⁷⁰ Mostly, he thought marriage, and family in general, was a distraction from divine service. We see evidence of this in a letter he wrote to his sister Patty following the death of three babies. He said, “I believe the death of your children is a great instance of the goodness of God toward you. You have often mentioned to me how much of your time they took up. Now that time is restored to you, and you have nothing to do but serve the Lord.”⁷¹ Certainly Susanna thought that time spent raising children was time spent in service to God, and John always honored her in the role of godly mother raising pious children. I suspect if pressed, John may have retracted his statements to Patty. On the other hand, he certainly had mixed feelings about dedication to marriage and family. A verse he wrote while a forty-three year old bachelor summarized his position:

I have no sharer of my heart
To rob my Savior of a part
And desecrate the whole;
Only betrothed to Christ am I
And wait his coming from the sky
To wed my happy soul.⁷²

⁶⁵Coe, 69.

⁶⁶Coe, 68.

⁶⁷Coe, 58.

⁶⁸Coe, 70.

⁶⁹Coe, 60-64.

⁷⁰Coe, 125.

⁷¹Coe, 129.

⁷²Coe, 62.

John was aware of the various forms of sexual radicalism in his day, such as clandestine marriage among bigamists, cohabitation, and wife selling. Perhaps this awareness contributed to his strong support of celibacy, and allowance for marriage for those who needed it as a guard against immorality. At the same time, his support for Sarah Ryan and Westley Hall led to rumors that he did not oppose polygamy. Ryan had supposedly "married" three different men, all of whom had abandoned her in one way or another, so that each of her later marriages was without benefit of divorce, which was illegal. Her first husband simply left, but it turned out that he was already married when he married her, so that marriage was never really legal. Then, while engaged to an Italian man, she married an Irish sailor. While he was away at sea, and she may have thought gone for good, she married the Italian. The Irish sailor never did come back, settling in America, and the Italian joined the British Navy, also never to return.⁷³ Sarah remained "single" thereafter and went on to become a devout Methodist, supporting herself as well as organizing an orphanage. Still, some Methodists were suspicious of her morals, none more so than Mrs. John Wesley herself. At a large dinner for Methodist preachers, Mrs. Wesley walked in and announced loudly, "The whore now serving you has three husbands living."⁷⁴ Marital status was often unclear though, due to clandestine marriage and unproven abandonments, so Sarah Ryan probably did not consider herself a polygamist. In addition, that life had been her past, but her life as a Methodist marked a conversion that led to a new morality. In either case, it would have been like John to accept her fully without condemnation.

John did not write a single original piece on marriage, but he did say enough here and there to know some of his positions on specific aspects of marriage. For one, he supported Parliament in their 1770 decision to ban any use of "perfume, cosmetics, wigs, or other beauty aids as a means of enticing a man into marriage."⁷⁵ He also recommended consulting others for their opinions on one's choice of a mate, so as to avoid mistakes. Although ultimately he did not follow that advice, we know he made such a pact with his brother, and required the same of all Methodist preachers.⁷⁶ He also prohibited all Methodists from marrying unbelievers because they would either take on a terrible burden for life, or be tempted to return to sinful ways. In 1768, he stated the questions which Methodists should ask themselves and each other in a letter as follows: Is the person (1) a believer, (2) a Methodist, (3) a member of our society, (4) clear with regard to the doctrine of perfection, and (5) is s/he athirst for it? The letter continued, "If he failed in any of these particulars, I fear he would be an hindrance to you rather than a helper."⁷⁷

⁷³Vivian H. H. Green, *The Young Mr. Wesley* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), 106.

⁷⁴Coe, 24.

⁷⁵Coe, 90.

⁷⁶Coe, 91-2.

⁷⁷Coe, 88-9.

In addition to friends, John believed Providence had a hand in one's choice of a mate. While in Georgia, he fell in love with a young woman named Sophey Hopkey. He tried to hold firmly to his convictions regarding celibacy as the more excellent way, but Miss Hopkey presented quite a temptation. Not only were his emotions raised, but he considered her a faithful servant of God, perhaps a good addition to his parsonage. His own thoughts were mixed, so he decided to draw lots to ascertain God's will, a common practice at the time. On one, he wrote "Marry." The next said, "Think not of it this year." The last read, "Think of it no more." With a friend, he prayed that God would lead them to the perfect lot, after which, his friend drew. The word from God was "Think of it no more" to which John was able to "say cheerfully, 'Thy will be done.'"⁷⁸ He later believed that his own unhappy marriage had been God's will too. Ironically, he was also known to warn people about being too sure of the will of God.⁷⁹

John believed that no wedding should be performed without the consent of parents. The only exceptions to this were (1) if the woman was under a necessity to marry, or (2) if her parents refuse to allow her to marry a Christian. But even in the cases of these exceptions, "Methodist preacher ought not to marry her." Unfortunately, it is not clear whether the preacher is barred from being the groom or merely officiating. He also believed that parents should seek the approval of their children before arranging their marriages. He once said that he thought his mother could forbid him from marrying someone, but that she could not command him to marry someone.⁸⁰

John asserted that a man should be able to support a wife before marrying. Perhaps thinking of his own father, he once wrote to a prospective bride that, "When poverty comes in at the door, love flies out at the window."⁸¹ Even during hard times though, he said that spouses should be reluctant to find faults in each other. He also taught that any corrections of a wife should be made in private, and always balanced with praise, which need not be private. He did not follow this advice in his own marriage though, which was full of bickering and contention. He also condemned domestic violence, saying that a man should never strike his wife, even if she struck first, unless his life was in danger. He believed that evil was best overcome with good.⁸² Note that corrections are made only to the wife. Although equals spiritually, John believed that women were to obey their husbands and that husbands were to rule for the wife's own good. At the same time, the husband should give over to the wife certain aspects of household management for which

⁷⁸Richard P. Heitzenrater, *The Elusive Mr. Wesley*, vol. 1, *John Wesley His Own Biographer* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 82.

⁷⁹Coe, 87.

⁸⁰Coe, 80-4.

⁸¹Coe, 110.

⁸²*The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler, vol. 3, *Sermons III* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 339.

she was better suited.⁸³

Overall, John's advice was to seek a Christian woman of middle age who has significant life experience and good sense.⁸⁴ He found such a woman in Grace Murray, a widow who served as his housekeeper for a time, and often traveled with him as well. Charles frowned upon the match, although John argued that she would be good for him as well as the Methodists. She was a good housekeeper, nurse, and companion, and she would not be a financial drain since he supported her already. Some suspect that Charles did not approve of John's marrying a servant because of her social class, but in addition, he firmly thought that John should remain single so he could devote himself completely to the movement.⁸⁵ Charles had married and settled, and he feared the same would happen for John, which would bring Methodism to a screeching halt. It is well known that Charles intervened to prevent the marriage, encouraging Grace to marry John Bennet instead, but much confusion ensued. Because at a number of points, both Grace and John agreed to get married, they may have created a legally binding contract, and therefore, a marriage. At one point after Grace's marriage to John Bennet, John mused about the possibility of going to court to claim his legal right to her. This has led some to believe there really was a marriage, but that John did not pursue it to avoid a falling out with John Bennet.⁸⁶ On the other hand, ultimately, it seems that John placed conditions on the agreement that were never met. He had insisted that (1) Grace seek the consent of John Bennet, her other suitor and a leader among the Methodists, (2) that Charles affirm the marriage, and (3) that they obtain the approval of the Methodist preachers and the people, as far as was possible. Grace had not clearly chosen him either. She noted that she was often jealous of his relationships with other women, and was not sure she wanted to marry into a lifetime of sharing him so widely.⁸⁷ In addition, the Anglican Church considered the ceremony an important part of the marriage process, and since John was a proper Anglican priest, it is unlikely that he would have considered his marriage final without the ceremony.⁸⁸ Knowing how nebulous the marriage process was in the first half of the 18th century, it is easy to see why there was confusion. Whether or not there was a legal marriage, John Wesley and Grace Murray never seemed to act as though there was, and Grace did officially marry John Bennet.

About two years later, in February 1751, John did marry, a wealthy middle-aged widow named Mary Vazeille, known as Molly. They met after he slipped on some ice and broke his ankle. He stayed at her home to recuper-

⁸³Coe, 101-112.

⁸⁴Leslie F. Church, *The Early Methodist People*, 2nd ed., (London: Epworth Press, 1949), 231.

⁸⁵Couture, 125.

⁸⁶Coe, 34.

⁸⁷Green, 106.

⁸⁸Frederick E. Maser, "John Wesley's Only Marriage: An Examination of Dr. Frank Baker's Article, 'John Wesley's First Marriage,'" *Methodist History* 16:1 (Oct. 1977), 36-41.

ate, during which time they read together and talked, wrote a Hebrew Grammar and a piece entitled, "Lessons for Children." It was a very brief courtship, and once he decided he wanted to marry her, he acted with haste. He was probably motivated by his failure to marry Grace Murray, partly due to his brother's intervention. That would not happen again. Charles found out about the marriage after the fact, which went against their pact to consult with each other. Charles was hurt that John would betray their promise, but also felt John was sacrificing the movement. This was not to be the case. John promised not to make any changes in his work because of his marriage. He said to Molly, "If I thought my dear I should have to travel or preach less, as well as I love you I would never see your face again."⁸⁹

One month after his marriage, he congratulated himself on his ability to keep this promise, quoting Scripture saying, "they who have wives be as though they had none."⁹⁰ On the other hand, Charles saw it as an unsuitable match,⁹¹ and he was probably right. At first, she tried to travel with him and adjust to his life and values, but after four years, she could not keep up. The traveling alone would have been hard on most women, but he demanded other things as well. As a Methodist, he wanted her to live simply and serve others, so he encouraged her to sell her jewelry and to take up visiting the prisons. She was soon complaining of the many hardships.⁹² Her complaints fell on deaf ears though and her resentment grew. John had directed her to open his mail while he was away, but this too became a problem. Many of the letters he received were from women in the movement, which made Molly jealous. She also read in some of the letters that John had complained about the marriage to some of these women, which infuriated her even more.⁹³ She was also jealous of John's friendship with Charles and of John's financial support of Charles' family. John explained that he paid Charles only what was due him from the publication of his hymns, but by then, it was likely that his explanations seemed empty.⁹⁴ It was becoming perfectly clear that, as promised, he was never going to change.

He seemed at a loss as to how to deal with their problems, and in 1758, after seven years of marriage filled with jealousies and fighting, he set out on a trip without telling her where he was going.⁹⁵ Increasingly, he stayed away from home, staying often in an apartment he provided for his sister, Emilia, in West Street Chapel.⁹⁶ Eventually, she left him and vowed not to return, but she continued to track both him and his associates. In the fall of

⁸⁹Maldwyn Edwards, *My Dear Sister: The Story of John Wesley and the Women in His Life*, (Manchester, England: Penwork (Leeds) Ltd., 1980), 42.

⁹⁰Coe, 71.

⁹¹Baker, 75.

⁹²Green, 105.

⁹³Edwards, 43.

⁹⁴Baker, 76.

⁹⁵Coe, 120.

⁹⁶Harmon, 161.

1758, he wrote her two letters, each listing the reasons he did not like her, which only angered her more. During the next years, she returned a few times, but their lengthy separations served to make her *persona non grata* among the Methodist people. She begged him to put a stop to all the gossip about her, but to no avail. She eventually left him for good in 1776. Divorce was illegal, which John supported (except in cases of adultery),⁹⁷ but their separation was final. She died in 1781, but John only found out some days after the fact, so he missed her burial.⁹⁸ Maldwyn Edwards sums it up best, saying that John Wesley should never have married because he, “had no taste or inclination for family life.”⁹⁹ Wesley even mused that God had intentionally given him an unhappy marriage so he would not be tempted to settle down, as Charles had done.¹⁰⁰ It is probably fortunate that John and Molly were older when they married and had no children. Still, John had plenty to say about child-rearing and educating children, mostly due to his own upbringing, which he thought was a good model, while also asserting that it was hard to raise truly pious children as his mother had done.¹⁰¹ He published two pieces, titled, “Family Religion” and “Some Thoughts on the Education of Children,” both of which are clearly reiterations of Susanna’s advice in support of strict discipline, so as to nurture obedience in children. He said that parents who reward crying in children are only cowards, wanting quick resolution rather than godly children, displaying not love of children, but hate.¹⁰² He also blamed the wickedness of children on parents who were too lenient, or simply neglectful, both teachings of Susanna.¹⁰³ He also claimed that obedience to parents was never outgrown, using himself as an example. He must have forgotten his refusal to take his father’s parish at his father’s request.¹⁰⁴

In “Some Thoughts on the Education of Children,” John included a long section on how to heal a child’s natural disease. He described the disease as (1) a tendency toward atheism, (2) selfishness, (3) pride, (4) love of the world, (5) anger, (6) lying, (7) injustice and (8) unmercifulness. All of these were believed to be inborn as a result of original sin. It was the parents’ job to bring about healing. To respond to each of these diseases respectively, John recommended (1) talking about God, (2) breaking the child’s will, (3) rarely praising them, and never to their faces, (4) providing simple meals and possessions, (5) teaching to forgive, (6) never lying so as to set an example, (7) not laughing at their tricks, and (8) teaching them to be kind to all creatures, even animals.¹⁰⁵ He believed that most parents fed rather than

⁹⁷Coe, 56.

⁹⁸Heitzenrater, 194.

⁹⁹Edwards, 42.

¹⁰⁰Coe, 71.

¹⁰¹Stone, 467.

¹⁰²*The Works of John Wesley*, 369.

¹⁰³*The Works of John Wesley*, 335.

¹⁰⁴*The Works of John Wesley*, 364.

¹⁰⁵*The Works of John Wesley*, 353-60.

healed these diseases. Along the same lines, he discouraged play in any form, referring to the German saying that if a child was allowed to play as a child, s/he would also play as an adult.¹⁰⁶

He also gave advice about finding a suitable spouse for a child. Overall, he recommended seeking a match that would glorify God, one in which the child would be able to grow in holiness, and not necessarily a match marked by wealth, which was more common at the time. He felt the same about helping sons find an appropriate occupation. Money was not to be the primary focus, but instead, an occupation in which holiness could be pursued.¹⁰⁷ He felt that most people were too concerned with wealth and status in making both kinds of decisions, and he was trying to shift the emphasis to God. He emphasized the importance of bringing religion into the home in every way, for every family member, including servants. This included not just decision making, but regular devotions and keeping the Sabbath. He called home religion “the grand desideratum among the Methodists.”¹⁰⁸

John was not as adamant as his mother and brother about the evils of schools. He did say that a student at Oxford would be surrounded by “loungers and triflers of every sort,” but this was as much a reference to the faculty as to one’s fellow students.¹⁰⁹ He recommended sending boys to small private schools which were kept by pious teachers, where a child would be trained, not only for this world, but the next. Girls, he thought, should be taught at home, as his sisters were, or in small groups with a godly mistress, whose names he listed, all of whom were Methodists.¹¹⁰ Although girls’ seminaries were available, he called them “polite prisons” for the wealthy who did not want to be bothered by their children, saying that he thought they taught mostly vanity and affectation. He actually said that parents should send their daughters to such places if they wanted them to go to hell.¹¹¹

He also founded his own school, the Kingswood School, for poor boys as well as the sons of his preachers, many of whom were also poor. In fact, while considering Grace Murray as a spouse, he mused that their children could go there so that he and she would be free to itinerate.¹¹² At Kingswood, he put in place a rigorous education that he felt excelled any at Oxford or Cambridge. The rules regarding discipline were very strict, taken from those in his own home. No playing or loud noise was allowed. The boys were allowed no visitation with their parents. Still, in that day, the rules were probably moderate, if not lenient compared to other schools where children

¹⁰⁶Church, 247.

¹⁰⁷*The Works of John Wesley*, 344-5.

¹⁰⁸Newton, 51.

¹⁰⁹J. H. Whiteley, *Wesley’s England: A Survey of XVIIIth Century Social and Cultural Conditions*, 2nd ed., (London: Epworth Press, 1954), 269.

¹¹⁰*The Works of John Wesley*, 343.

¹¹¹Whiteley, 280-2.

¹¹²Green, 94.

were beaten regularly.¹¹³ In some ways, John was innovative, such as in his belief that education should be available to all people. Kingswood represented that.¹¹⁴

Methodism was a countercultural movement and as such, took some unpopular positions regarding many things, including family. Clearly, the Methodist view of family had much in common with that of the Puritans, another minority group. Significantly, Susanna was raised by Puritan parents, which set the tone for her parenting as well. Her mode of strict discipline and moral training actually became the hallmark of Methodism, within the family and without, in biological families and in the Methodist family overall. Under that Puritan umbrella, the five specific family values claimed by the Methodists of the time were: (1) strict discipline, (2) home school, (3) home religion, (4) God above family, and (5) redefinition of family as Methodists.

First and foremost is the focus on strict discipline of children, necessary because of belief in sinful human nature. Even with Susanna's insistence on moderation in corporal punishment, she remained strong and consistent in both physical and psychological control of children. Her written rules indicate that her techniques were both thoughtful and methodical. That she considered the teaching of Christian morality and holiness to her children as her calling and career is obvious from both the content of that document as well as its very existence. John then published her advice as his own and encouraged the Methodists to follow it. Charles' inability to inculcate Methodist piety in his sons is often blamed on his lack of insistence on that strict discipline, allowing them instead to be influenced by outside, unholy forces.

The best way to teach and maintain discipline was home schooling. While the adult Methodist was expected to go into the world in evangelical service and mission, the Methodist child was to be isolated and carefully trained in a very restricted environment. The family served as the child's class meeting, the site of learning and accountability, a task which would later fall to the Sunday School. The third family value was the emphasis on home religion. Family devotions were waning in the larger culture, but not among Methodists. Religious instruction and discussion along with worship were regular practices in Methodist homes. Often, non-family members were included as well, which reflected the fact that virtually all of early Methodism occurred in homes.¹¹⁵ More than for Puritans, who also encouraged family devotions, Methodism was family religion simply by virtue of its location in the home. The fourth Methodist family value involves the gen-

¹¹³Maldwyn Edwards, *John Wesley and the Eighteenth Century: A Study of His Social and Political Influence*, rev. ed. (London: Epworth Press, 1955), 134.

¹¹⁴W. J. Townsend, H. B. Workman, and George Eayrs, *A New History of Methodism*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church South, 1909), 218.

¹¹⁵Russell E. Richey, "Are the Local Church and Denominational Bureaucracy 'Twins?'" in *Questions for the Twenty-First Century Church*, ed. Russell E. Richey, William B. Lawrence, and Dennis M. Campbell (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 233.

eral teaching that all of life was to focus on God alone. While many 18th-century English people were open to the increased influence of the secular, Methodist people sought to avoid it. For example, the availability of secular novels was on the rise, making reading for pleasure more and more popular.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, Methodists were to read only those things that would lead to greater holiness, such as the Bible of course, but also Wesley's works and other tracts provided by the Methodist publishing office. The impact on the family was to limit "secular" life to zero. John Wesley was concerned early in his marriage that he and his wife enjoyed one another too much, leading them to forget their focus on God, even if temporarily. Certainly this constant self-evaluation hindered their relationship and maybe that of other Methodists as well. A non-Methodist family member was considered "outside" of the more important family of God, the Methodist family.

The distinction between biological family and Methodist family is important. John's seeming lack of family values in his marriage was really his attachment to the movement and to Methodists overall which led to neglect of his wife who he perceived as a stumbling block. His loyalty to his family of orientation though, which posed no restrictions on his ministry, remained strong. Charles' choice to locate and focus on his family led to the reduction in his role as leader. Women and men alike, when pursuing Methodist leadership, left traditional families behind, becoming instead a member of the Methodist family, calling each other "brother" and "sister." But these same leaders taught the above-mentioned family values, even if not practicing them in traditional, biological families themselves. They remained Methodist family values in whatever family one had. In fact, this redefinition of family as not limited by biology and inclusive of those who share religious commitments is a family value in itself. While society's definition of family was shrinking from extended to nuclear, Methodism was extending beyond either of those bounds while also allowing for the exclusion of the same. What is significant is not the size or number of family members, but that they felt the freedom to redefine it at all.

It seems that current debates over family values are not much different from those in Wesley's day. Although the contexts have changed, our thinking about families can still be informed by Wesley's teachings on the subject, even if tempered. We no longer beat the will out of children, but teaching discipline and morality is still a goal. While many do not try to isolate children from the poor or others who are different, we acknowledge the impact of peer influences and often try to parent accordingly. As with many of Wesley's teachings, they cannot be plunked down into the present, unchanged, but they should not be dismissed or ignored either. While many

116 Edmund S. Morgan, *Virginians at Home: Family Life in the Eighteenth Century*, (Williamsburg, Va.: William Byrd Press, 1952), 157.

people remember John Wesley's miserable marriage and his unusually close attachment to his mother, we must also remember his commitment to his siblings and to child-rearing. A crucial distinction though is that he saw "family" as a public commitment rather than private. Most of contemporary debate over family values focuses on biological and legally recognized families rather than the family of God. Perhaps it is here that Wesley can make the greatest contribution to contemporary family values debates.