

Susanna Wesley and the Quadrilateral

TEXT: Acts 15:1-21

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on May 12, 2024

There are few things more satisfying than realizing that Mother's Day falls in the middle of a sermon series on Methodism. While John Wesley, with an assist from his hymn-writing brother Charles, gets all the formal credit for creating the Methodist movement, the things that made their success possible were the foundational attitudes, beliefs, and practices instilled in them from infancy by their mother, Susanna Annesley Wesley.

So, on this day, I want to talk about her and the way that her teaching and example brought us to where we are today, right down to the decisions made at General Conference that we talked about last week.

I'll be highlighting an arcane term called the Quadrilateral, which is not a term Wesley used himself, but is a word coined by the late Wesley scholar Dr. Albert Outler, as he studied the process by which Wesley made decisions in creating the 18th century reform movement that came to be called "Methodism."

Earlier reform movements, by Martin Luther and others, focused on giving people access to Bibles they could read and interpret for themselves rather than relying on priests to tell everyone what it said and what it meant. And that was critical. But as time moved forward and the Age of Reason began to take hold, especially in Europe, some decided that the Bible and its laws and rules needed to be put aside and let reason and science guide decisions instead. Then, as Romanticism rose up to counter the perceived cold and sterile decisions of the Enlightenment, still others began to argue that it was the lived experience of every individual that should dictate behavior and decisions.

Born in England in 1703 and living a full 87 years, John Wesley's life spanned almost the entire 18th century, just as all those things were merging and competing. But Wesley didn't side with one thing over another. He thought all four things: Scripture, the traditions of the church, reason, and lived experience should all be evaluated by both individual Christians and by churches or larger Christian bodies before making a decision.

The process Wesley believed best for raising all those considerations, was the process we talked about last week—holy conferencing. But the major influences he allowed to have weight were those four things: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. Albert Outler named that "The Quadrilateral."

So how did Wesley come to that both/and rather than either/or way of thinking? The short answer is, through the example of his mother, Susanna. Both of John Wesley's parents, Samuel and Susanna, were each themselves children of clergymen in the Church of England who had become "Dissenters," that is those who disagreed with the established church on important matters and who became part of various protesting, or "Protestant" congregations.

So, John Wesley's grandparents on both sides of his family were Church of England clergy who became Dissenters. But then, both of his parents had dissented from the Dissenting churches of their respective fathers and returned to the Church of England at a young age. Samuel did so at 13, and Susanna made that decision at 12.

Before we leave that generation, notable here is that Susanna's father, Rev. Annesley, believed strongly in the education of girls--something not popular at the time of her birth in 1669. He made sure all his girls had access to any of his books and were taught from an early age to think for themselves. Susanna was the youngest of 25 children, but she got as much attention to her education as any of the others. When Susanna decided at age 12 to become part of the Church of England—the church from which her father had dissented and left—he made no protest. He taught her to think for herself, and she did.

At a wedding of one of her sisters, Susanna Annesley met Samuel Wesley, who by then had become a priest in the Church of England; and they were married in 1688. They had 19 children, nine of whom died in infancy.

Samuel wrote poetry and academic theological work in addition to his life as a parish priest. The title of his first book of poetry was titled "Maggots: or Poems on Several Subjects never before Handled," and his life's work was a commentary on the book of Job. A Wikipedia editor, bravely trying to find something nice to say about Samuel Wesley's writing, said of his literary criticism, "But though it is neither brilliant nor well written...it is not without interest."

Trying to get Samuel's work appreciated and into print plunged the family into financial ruin, landing Samuel in jail twice for financial mismanagement. He and Susanna had political differences, supporting different claims to the English throne. When Samuel prayed for King William III and Susanna refused to say "Amen" at the end of the prayer, Samuel said to her, "You and I must part, for if we have two kings, we have two beds." And he left the family for a full year before reconciling and coming home. Although they never reconciled their thoughts on the rightful heir to the English throne.

It was during that year of Samuel's absence that Susanna realized she and the children would only survive with structure. She wrote the following to her absent husband:

"I am a woman, but I am also the mistress of a large family. And though the superior charge of the souls contained in it lies upon you, yet in your long absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my charge as a talent committed to me under a trust. I am not a man nor a minister, yet as a mother and a mistress I felt I ought to do more than I had yet done. I resolved to begin with my own children; in which I observe the following method: I take such a proportion of time as I can spare every night to discourse with each child apart. On Monday I talk with Molly, on Tuesday with Hetty, Wednesday with Nancy, Thursday with Jacky [Which was John Wesley's nickname as a child], Friday with Patty, Saturday with Charles."

Ah, yes.. the emergence of the "method." But more "method" would be needed as more trouble ensued. Samuel did come back home, but his congregation in Epworth hated him so much that they took it out on his property. They burned the Wesley's crops, maimed their livestock, and set fire to the parsonage—not once but twice. His poetry must have been really bad.

The second fire, in 1709, nearly cost the family their lives as it was set as the family slept in their wooden, thatched-roof home. One of their daughters, Hetty, woke to a burning beam dropping on her bed. She ran to her father and they rushed to get everyone out of the house. They thought they had everyone, but when they gathered outside, they realized that five-year-old Jacky wasn't with them. The stairs by which they had just escaped were, by then, engulfed in flame.

The family knelt in prayer to commend Jacky's soul to God, Samuel and Susanna believing they had lost yet another of their children. But then Jacky appeared in an upstairs window crying out for help. Those who had gathered below made a human ladder and pulled the young John Wesley from the flames. The house burned to the ground and all their possessions were lost, but all lives were saved.

In talking about that second fire and the near loss of little Jacky, Susanna came to refer to him as a "brand plucked from the burning," a reference to Zechariah 3:2 where God references saving Israel with that phrase. For John Wesley, he took that phrase to heart as he came to see the hand of God as saving his life for some greater purpose as he grew.

Disasters like that cause trauma and affect families in myriad ways. In the case of the Wesley's, the total destruction of the house meant that all the children had to be sent to live with other families during the two years it took to rebuild the parsonage—out of brick this time.

When the new home was ready and the children finally came back home, Susanna was horrified at the habits they had picked up from the other families, including the way they spoke and a tendency to prefer play to study.

We can almost hear the voice of Susanna in John Wesley's later rules for his preachers. Rule #1: "Be diligent. Never be unemployed. Never be triflingly employed. Never while away time, nor spend more time at any place than is strictly necessary." To this day, everyone ordained in the United Methodist Church has to assent to that rule.

Another ordination question that Wesley added a bit later tried to keep his clergy from falling into his father's difficulties with money. Again, every crew of new ordinands still has to stand before all the clergy of the Annual Conference to answer the question, "Are you in debt so as to embarrass you in your work?"

The denomination still echoes the lessons of Susanna Wesley and tries to prevent the roots of much of the family's misery during John Wesley's childhood. But with her children having been taught by many people in their two-year sojourn in the homes of others, Susanna now faced a larger challenge to get them all back to where she thought they should be. And she met that challenge by expanding her "method"

A 1961 biography of John Wesley by Ingvar Haddal describes Susanna's new system this way. And remember as I read this that the only classes they had were at home and the only teacher they had was Susanna:

“Under no circumstances were the children permitted to have any lessons until they had reached their fifth year, but the day after their fifth birthday their formal education began. They attended classes for six hours and on the very first day they were supposed to learn the whole of the alphabet. All her children except two managed this feat, and these seemed to Susanna to be very backward.”¹⁴ “The children got a good education. Daughters included, they all learnt Latin and Greek and were well tutored in the classical studies that were traditional in England at that time.”¹⁵

A website in the UK about the old Epworth rectory has an article about Susanna that notes the two children who so frustrated Susanna in failing to learn the alphabet on the day after their fifth birthday were two daughters, Molly and Nancy, who took a day and a half. And that Hetty, the daughter who woke to the burning beam falling on her bed, could read parts of the New Testament in Greek by age 8. It wasn't her clergyman father who taught her that. It was her mother.

But Samuel was still throwing Susanna curveballs. On an extended trip to London, Samuel hired an interim priest to cover for him at Epworth. The interim was terrible, and the congregation began to dwindle. Susanna feared that her own children would not receive a proper religious education from the interim's sermons, so after they all attended church in the morning, she gathered them at home for family services on Sunday afternoons. Here's how the Haddal biography describes what happened:

“They would sing a psalm and then Susanna would read a sermon from either her husband's or father's sermon file followed by another psalm. The local people began to ask if they could attend. At one point there were over 200 people who would attend Susanna's Sunday afternoon service while the Sunday morning service dwindled to nearly nothing.”¹⁶

Susanna began doing her own meditations and scriptural commentaries for her own use. Those included extensive commentaries on the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Apostle's Creed. Oxford University Press published a volume of her writings in 1997.

My favorite, and admittedly biased, example of how all that came together in the life of the adult John Wesley is the way he came to license women preachers. And this is where we can see the Quadrilateral—the combined consideration of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience—working under the hood.

Wesley well knew the Bible passages that said women shouldn't speak in church and shouldn't have authority over men. And he wrestled a long time because of it. He valued Scripture greatly and didn't go against what he thought it meant lightly. And the tradition of the Anglican church had followed that guide. Anglicans didn't allow for the ordination of women in the 18th century, and in some parts of that tradition still don't today.

But Wesley finally couldn't ignore the fact that the Holy Spirit was blessing and using women...even to convert and teach men. His experience, especially with his mother leading a service for 200 people on Sunday afternoons in their home, couldn't be reconciled with the church tradition and its interpretation of the Bible. He watched her lead with his own eyes, and he watched that leadership bear fruit, even as he watched the men in his father's pulpit struggle to nourish a single soul.

Wesley could also see that his mother was not alone in her ability to bear witness to the Gospel with wisdom and power, as he watched the women in the new Methodist movement begin to draw crowds and saw that the Holy Spirit was blessing their efforts, despite what the Bible appeared to say about the matter.

In that, we can hear echoes of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 when Paul and Barnabas pointed out that, despite what the Bible absolutely clearly said about the people of God needing to be circumcised, they were witnessing the Holy Spirit getting poured out on uncircumcised Gentiles without God issuing so much as an apology for that Scriptural violation.

The entire debate at that very first council of the very first followers of Jesus was a debate about how to weigh the plain text of the Bible that said circumcision was absolutely necessary, and the two-thousand years of tradition since the covenant of circumcision was given to Abraham, against the experience of God moving, blessing, and changing Gentiles, without a scalpel, before their very eyes. They struggled to make rational sense of it, just as Wesley did when considering whether or not to license women to preach.

While first Wesley tried to thread the needle by saying that the women were not actually “preaching,” but merely “exhorting,” eventually his reason kicked in and led him to acknowledge that Methodist women were doing in their homes and in the fields exactly what male priests were doing in their pulpits. And the women were often more effective in moving people not only to welcome Christ into their hearts, but also to help them live the teachings of Jesus from Monday through Saturday—which is what his whole reform movement was about. Some of the women drew thousands of people at a time, bringing many people into the fledgling Methodist movement.

So, Wesley began licensing women, beginning with a woman named Sarah Crosby who he licensed to preach in 1761. And it was a woman named Mary Bosanquet Fletcher who, a decade later, wrote to Wesley what is the first written defense of women’s preaching in Methodism. There’s a whole book about it called *She Offered Them Christ: The Legacy of Women Preachers in Early Methodism* by Paul Wesley Chilcote, published in 1993.

Wesley then went even further by preaching against the notion that women should be submissive. Perhaps as he aged, he saw that his mother had bent over backwards to remain submissive to Samuel, and it had not helped the family at all. It was Wesley himself who removed the word “obey” from the marriage rite that he sent to his Methodist preachers in the United States in 1784. And in 1786 he preached a sermon called “On Visiting the Sick” that attacked head on the notion that women should be submissive.

But, while Wesley allowed for more autonomy for women, and recognized their ability and calling to preach, he never went as far as to allow women to vote in the gatherings of his preachers, the Annual Conference. We talked about the Conference system last week.

Refusing women that last step of having an equal vote with their male colleagues was costly. After Wesley’s death in 1791, the men of the Conference voted that women could no longer be licensed, and Methodist women didn’t get the privilege back again until 1956. With just a tiny bit more reason added to the Scripture, Tradition, and Experience, Wesley might have recognized that his mother would have been more than capable of understanding and casting an informed and faithful vote at an Annual Conference.

While little Hettie Wesley was reading New Testament Greek at eight years old, that is not the norm for most Christians. Since even the mere act of translating the Bible from its original languages into English requires interpretation, and since the Bible is a collection of complex texts by many authors written over millennia, I have to agree with Wesley that while “Sola Scriptura” was a helpful first step, and we need to include biblical principles in our decision making, we’ll miss the mark if that’s all we consider. We are capable of mistakes.

Both in Wesley’s consideration of licensing women to preach and in the Council of Jerusalem’s debate over whether Gentiles had to become Jews through circumcision before they could be true followers of Jesus, the notion that every law in the Bible had to be applied in the same way for all people in all places and in all times ran headlong into the belief that Jesus had risen from the dead and was quite alive, roaming around doing new things through the power of the Holy Spirit. In John 16:12-13, Jesus explains to his disciples on the night of his arrest, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.”

To be correctly understood and applied, the Bible needs to be read with the Holy Spirit on one shoulder, in holy conferencing with the wisdom of other Christians on the other, our brains engaged, and our eyes wide open to what God is doing in the lives of those we meet every day.

That combination of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience allowed the Council of Jerusalem to set aside one of the most fundamental laws in the Hebrew Bible and declare circumcision—the very sign of the Abrahamic covenant—no longer relevant to the current situation. If God would bless the uncircumcised, which was plainly happening, who were they to deny the Spirit’s work? Jesus is alive! Is God not allowed to do new things?

That same nuanced thinking finally broke through at General Conference just over a week ago, when the plain experience of God gifting and blessing LGBTQ clergy and laity, finally—after 52 years—called the same question. Is Jesus still alive and at work in the world? Are all things still possible with God? The delegates answered with a resounding, “Yes!” “Whosoever will may come.”

In fits and starts, with stumbles and woes, the church of Jesus Christ has made it to the year of our Lord 2024 because women like Susanna Annesley taught men like John Wesley to call upon the full range of spiritual, intellectual, and contextual gifts God had given them when representing the image of God in the world. Dr. Albert Outler called that process the Quadrilateral. Today we might call it “holistic thinking” or “embodied presence.” Or, maybe, simply “grace.” Amen.