

PROFILES IN FAITH

Susanna Wesley (1669-1742)

Mother of Methodism

by Arthur Dicken Thomas, Jr.



During the year 2003 when Christians all over the world are celebrating the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Wesley, attention is also being given to his remarkable mother, Susanna Annesley Wesley. As women in our century have turned their attention to notable females as role models, Protestants have recognized Susanna Wesley as one of the greatest women in Christ as well as the Mother of Methodism.

Susanna faithfully tried to live within the confines of the domestic sphere prescribed for women of her time, but she also succeeded in making a mark in history not only through her two sons, John and Charles Wesley, but also for the bold things she attempted as a woman. Despite the limitations on women in her day, Susanna exercised an independence of conscience as she followed the truths of Scripture, served in a pastoral role while yet a housewife, and wrote as a lay theologian and guide to members of her family.

Independence of Conscience

On January 20, 1669 (Old Style), Susanna Annesley was born as the 25th child of Puritan parents who were part of a movement which sought to purify the Church of England of what it saw as unbiblical practices and to inject a vital piety into the slumbering national church. Her father was the Rev. Dr. Samuel Annesley (c. 1620-1699). Later called the St. Paul of the Nonconformists, Rev. Annesley previously served as Anglican priest at St. Giles' Cripplegate, London, until he was ejected from this parish since he could not, for conscience sake, adhere to the Act of Uniformity of 1662 (which required the use of the Book of Common Prayer in the Anglican Church) due to his Presbyterian beliefs. He became pastor of the Meeting House in Little Saint Helens, a Nonconformist congregation in London. Susanna was born at her father's home at Spital Yard, Bishops-gate, London, which can still be seen today. The name of her mother is unknown.

During Susanna's childhood the Annesley home was visited by several great Puritan writers: Richard Baxter, John Owen, and Thomas Manton—who baptized Susanna. Here Susanna got to hear the discussions of the Puritan leaders and their arguments against the

Church of England and in favor of Puritan dissent. In her father's home she also met a member of her father's congregation, Daniel Defoe, who later wrote *Robinson Crusoe*.

Both Protestant Reformation and Puritanism emphasized the importance of conscience as arbiter of an individual's actions. Susanna's Puritan father often preached on freedom of conscience, and she certainly inherited his independence of mind and his willingness to dissent from religious practices when conscience dictated.

The mind and conscience of the young Susanna were informed by careful Puritan education. Susanna described the religious practice she observed growing up:

I will tell you what rule I observed...when I was young, and too much addicted to childish diversions, which was this—never to spend more time in mere recreation in one day than I spent in private religious devotions.

The exact nature of her education is not known, but Susanna used the English language with great precision and had a theological knowledge superior to that of many pastors of that day. The Annesley household provided, in Susanna's words, "the foundations of solid piety...in sound principles and virtuous dispositions."

Susanna exercised an independence of conscience that would take her from Puritan Nonconformity into the Church of England. She made this decision when "not full thirteen" even though her father was a prominent Presbyterian pastor. This teenager demonstrated a strength of decision relatively unheard of in so young a child.

On November 12, 1688, at St. Marylebone Church, London, Susanna married Samuel Wesley, who had previously renounced his Puritan Nonconformist background to become an Anglican priest. Samuel became Anglican curate of two small parishes, rector at one other, and chaplain of a Man-o-War ship, but he spent most of his years as rector at Epworth in Lincolnshire, England. The rectory and St. Andrew's Parish Church

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in Epworth are places of Methodist pilgrimage today.

Samuel and Susanna had 17—some accounts say 19—children, but only 10 survived infancy. Both Samuel and Susanna were attracted to the sense of Christian continuity in the Church of England, and they wanted to avoid the religious controversies that had sprung forth from Puritanism and other dissenting bodies.

Susanna was not afraid to stand by her convictions no matter the cost. This led to marriage difficulties for a time, when for conscience sake, she could not say “Amen” to the prayers her husband offered on behalf of the king. This had to do with the exile of James II and the Glorious Revolution under King William and Queen Mary. George Hicks, a non-juring Bishop, urged her, “Wherefore good Madam stick to God and your conscience which are your best friends, whatever you may suffer for adhering to them.” Samuel’s response was, “If we have two kings, we must have two beds.”

Susanna claimed that a husband “has no power over the conscience of his wife,” and “I value neither reputation, friends, or anything, in comparison of the singular satisfaction of preserving a conscience void of offence towards God and man.” These are remarkable statements of a woman who wanted to apply views on Christian liberty to women. Her convictions on the freedom of conscience may have influenced her son John to undertake reforms in the Church of England. Eventually Susanna and Samuel were reconciled, and, in time, John Wesley, the future leader of the Evangelical movement in England, was born in 1703.

Susanna in a Pastoral Role

As a mother and the wife of an Anglican rector, Susanna exercised a strong pastoral role in her home. To help her children learn the faith, she wrote a detailed and lengthy exposition of the Apostles’ Creed. She started “the custom of singing psalms at beginning and leaving school, morning and evening.” She had her older children instruct the younger children in Bible study and prayers before breakfast and in the evening. Every evening she provided an hour or so to discuss with each of her sons and daughters their “principal concerns,” providing them her spiritual direction.

In 1712 Susanna wrote her husband of her pastoral concerns for his parishioners:

At last it came into my mind, though I am not a man, nor a minister of the gospel, and so cannot be engaged in such a worthy employmentyet...I might do somewhat more than I do...I might pray more for the people, and speak with more warmth to those with whom I have an opportunity of conversing.

A more pronounced pastoral dimension of ministry

developed when Samuel was away at the Convocation of the Church of England in London for several months at a time. Susanna for some time had regularly gathered her household, including the children and servants, to sing psalms and listen to printed sermons, after which she would read the service for Evening Prayer from the Book of Common Prayer. During the winter of 1710-1711 some of the Wesleys’ neighbors joined in these times as well. She wrote that one local boy

...told his parents; they first desired to be admitted. Then others who heard of it begged leave also [requested admittance]. So our company increased to about thirty...

In his absence, Samuel paid curates to perform his priestly duties. In the winter of 1711-1712, an ineffective curate was in charge, and people began to flock to Susanna’s kitchen prayer meeting. Samuel’s associate, Godfrey Inman, wrote to him relaying the fact that his wife was drawing more townspeople to the Sunday night meetings in her home than were coming to the services which Godfrey led in church on Sunday morning.

Susanna explained in a letter to her husband:

With those few neighbours who then came to me I discoursed more freely and affectionately than before; I chose the best and most awakening sermons we had, and I spent more time with them in such exercises.... Since this, our company has increased every night; for I dare deny none who ask admittance. Last Sunday I believe we had above two hundred, and many went away for want of room.

Although not an ordained priest, Susanna was offering the parishioners a complete Anglican service by reading prayers and a sermon of her husband. When her husband wrote her voicing the objections of Inman, Susanna wrote back to him:

If you do, after all, think fit to dissolve this assembly, do not tell me that you desire me to do it, for that will not satisfy my conscience: but send me your positive command, in such full and express terms as may absolve me from all guilt and punishment for neglecting this opportunity of doing good when you and I shall appear before the great and awful tribunal of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In response to this letter, Samuel allowed his wife’s meetings to continue until his return home.

Susanna was not trying to become a priest, rather she was attempting to engage in the evangelism of her neighbors at a time when families who seldom went to church were willing to attend her home services. Only

20 or 25 would attend the curate's service, but as many as three hundred came to her kitchen meetings. The kitchen meetings came to an end when her husband returned to resume his duties as rector of the parish. Her reasons for creating a house meeting were the salvation of souls, her care of her children's spiritual development, and a desire to observe the Sabbath strictly. Later John Wesley wrote that his mother "had been in her measure and degree a preacher of righteousness."

Although discontinued, Susanna's kitchen meetings made a lasting impression on young John. One can find in her rectory kitchen meetings the genesis of Methodist class meetings. Both her meetings and the later Methodist classes were not conducted in place of the official services of the Church of England. Rather, they were what we might today call para-church groups to encourage the spiritual growth of faithful Anglicans without being in competition with established services. Susanna had referred to the people who composed these meetings as "our Society," a reference later reflected in her sons' organization of Methodists into societies, classes, and bands.

Her sons John and Charles also witnessed their mother's effectiveness as a lay person in leading worship and teaching. Interestingly, after John had been ordained and, in time, commenced preaching in the open fields like the Evangelicals, he was horrified over allowing lay people to preach. Susanna herself was blessed by the preaching of a Methodist layman named Thomas Maxfield, probably in 1740, when she lived at the Foundry in London. When John seemed determined to stop Maxfield's unauthorized preaching, Susanna warned,

My son, I charge you before God, beware what you do; for Thomas Maxfield is as much called to preach the gospel as ever you were.

John followed her advice. His subsequent use of lay preachers was the genius of Methodism. This movement produced more lay preachers than denominations that required university-trained clergy. The lay people often spoke on the level of miners and farmers in ways that erudite clergy found difficult.

John Wesley also remembered his mother's success during her kitchen prayer meetings as a female religious leader. Some scholars believe this may have influenced him to allow female lay preachers in Methodist societies even though he did not advocate the ordination of women to the Anglican priesthood. He allowed women to exercise leadership roles in Methodist class and band meetings. Female lay preachers had Wesley's support, encouragement, and approval to travel and preach. However, John Wesley's support for women

was not shared by other male leaders of Methodism. In fact, after his death, female preachers were censured.

A Female Theologian of Practical Divinity

Within the domestic sphere of her home Susanna tried to be a lay theologian and educator of her many children. Adam Clarke (c. 1760-1832) in his *Memoirs of the Wesley Family* noted: "If it were not unusual to apply such an epithet to a woman, I would not hesitate to say she was an able divine." Her writings now fill a published volume. As a spiritual guide Susanna composed letters filled with wisdom for her children. Seventy-three of these letters still exist and attest to her brilliant mind and insight as a counselor. She wrote three theological compositions for her children to use in their religious instruction: an exposition of the Apostles' Creed, a commentary on the Decalogue, and a dialogue on natural and revealed religion. Copies of all three have survived. She taught her children each day from morning until noon and from two until five in the afternoon and used these occasions to teach theology. In a 1709 letter to her son Samuel Wesley, Jr., Susanna mentioned a manual of theology that she was writing in which she described her reasons for believing in God, her motives for embracing the truth of Jesus Christ, and an account of why she had left the Puritan Dissenters for the Church of England. Unfortunately, these were destroyed in the Epworth rectory fire.

Coming from Puritan and Anglican backgrounds, Susanna was extremely well read. While growing up, she had access to her father's large library of English divinity (Anglican, Catholic, and Puritan). Her devotional journals during her Anglican years reveal the writers that influenced her: Blaise Pascal, Anglican theologians William Beveridge and George Bull, philosophers Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, George Berkeley, and Seneca, and spiritual writers such as Thomas à Kempis, Jeremy Taylor, Richard Baxter, and Juan de Castaniza. Her son John later published abridged versions of some of the spiritual classics that she had recommended to him.

Susanna's theological shift to Methodism needs comment. Her son John came to an experience of the assurance of salvation at a Moravian meeting at Aldersgate Street on May 24, 1738. He wrote:

I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

This led him to preach on the new birth and the assurance of salvation.

A year before John's Aldersgate experience,

Susanna wrote about her own views on justification by faith alone.

I verily think one great reason why Christians are so often subject to despond is that they look more to themselves than to their Saviour: they would establish a righteousness of their own to rest on, without advertising enough to the sacrifice of Christ, by which we alone are justified before God.

Then in August 1739 she had her own experience of personal assurance of salvation that God had forgiven her all of her sins, whereas previously she had reservations about this type of assurance. She described what happened at Holy Communion in 1739:

When my son Hall [her daughter Martha's husband] was pronouncing those words, in delivering the cup to me, "The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee," the words struck through my heart, and I knew God for Christ's sake had forgiven me all my sins.

Following this conversion Susanna affiliated herself with the Methodist movement of renewal and its doctrines. As the Great Awakening spread under the leadership of both George Whitefield and John Wesley, so debates over the question of predestination caused controversy. Whitefield espoused Calvinism. Susanna rose to the defense of her son's Arminian theology by publishing anonymously a pamphlet entitled *Some Remarks on a Letter from the Reverend Mr. Whitefield to the Rev. Mr. Wesley, in a Letter from a Gentlewoman to her Friend*. Although accustomed to the reserved ceremony of the Church of England, this elderly widow found she could adapt to the outdoor preaching of the Methodists, their extemporaneous prayers, lay preachers, Evangelical theology, and fiery evangelism. Perhaps she might have been a more prolific apologist for Methodism had she not died on July 23, 1742, just a few years after the movement began in 1738.

As Susanna drew near to death, she did so with Christian assurance and triumph. John recorded:

Her soul was set at liberty. We stood around the bed and fulfilled her last request, uttered a little before she lost her speech, "Children, as soon as I am released, sing a psalm of praise to God."

She was buried in the Dissenters' cemetery at Bunhill Fields, opposite the spot where 36 years later the Methodists built Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London. Susanna was buried in the same cemetery with John Bunyan, John Owen, William Blake, Daniel Defoe, and Isaac Watts.

This mother of Methodism influenced her son John and future generations with respect to independence of conscience, ministry roles of women, and lay theologians. Susanna encouraged the laity to become theologians, to read the best philosophy, spirituality, and theology of their time, and to communicate this faith in a manner comprehensible to family members, parishioners, and the market place. Her writings are being rediscovered today and challenge women to become articulate teachers and defenders of the faith and effective theologians of "practical divinity."

For additional information, recommended books are:

Arnold A. Dallimore, *Susanna Wesley*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993.

Charles Wallace, Jr., *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.



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