

SUSANNAH WESLEY AS EPITOME FOR EFFECTIVE CHRISTIAN FAMILY PARENTING IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

To sustain the sanity of every given society, it is imperative that every given parent in the society should uphold good and godly parenting especially the Christian model of parenting. It is disheartening that godly model of parenting that formed the bedrock of discipline by parent of old is fast fading away in contemporary time. It is observed that this could be due to the widespread of high level of poverty ravaging the society, and which has mounted a lot of pressure on many parents, thereby resulting in partial or total neglect of the children without a guide to fend for themselves. This among other factors has prevented a good number of parents from devoting quality time to effectively nurture and train their children to imbibe godly virtues. This has consequently contributed to the un-abating prevalence of so many youngsters clinging to evil vices, leading to wayward lifestyle across the globe. Therefore, the paper examined Susannah's model of parenting to serve as a guide to Christian parenting. The study employed sociological, historical and theological methods to evaluate the circumstances. Susannah Wesley raised great men like John and Charles Wesley, known as fathers of modern Evangelicalism due to her diligence to motherly duties. The study concludes that, Susannah Wesley was an epitome of honesty and justice who raised great men of faith in church history. The paper recommends that, her principles, virtues be incorporated into Seminaries' curriculum and church activities as a model to be taught and practiced in Christian homes.

Introduction

Negative parenting which is a culmination of negligence or harmful actions by parents that impact a child's developmental and mental well-being into adulthood has become a source of concern to the society of late. This is because, it has led to several challenges faced by the church, such as: drug abuse, unwanted pregnancy, alcoholism, radical Islam, poverty, and unemployment, etc. These issues call for urgent attention of parents to give their children enough training in order to bring them up in the way of God.

In many respects, Wesleyans were by far the most important phenomenon of the eighteenth century. It was the second great movement of deliverance out of the darkness

of the Middle Ages. Its foundation was laid in the soul of Susannah Wesley. “Her brain and heart and will power were the original guiding, conserving and propelling force of Methodism.” When God sets out to make a great man, He first makes a great woman. The youngest daughter (24th child) of Dr. Samuel Annesly was married to Samuel Wesley in 1689. They lived most of their lives at Epworth Rectory and became parents to nineteen children, nine of which died in infancy. It was a loving family with many tragedies and many persecutions. Susannah was a godly wife and an exemplary mother who managed her household well. She reared her children carefully, logically and methodically.

Susannah resolutely kept one hour each morning and each evening for prayer, and meditation, and the study of God’s Word. She usually fed her own mind on the Bible. She was incomparably superior to her husband in practical genius, though lovingly blind to the fact. Her lifelong devotion to this hot-headed man is the marvel of all women and the envy of men. She systematically instructed her children one hour. Each week was devoted for each child for devotion, prayer and fellowship. Each child on its fifth birthday was allowed a day to learn the alphabets. Then the first lesson was to spell out the first chapter in the Bible. On the sixth birthday, began six hours daily in classes learning Christian theology. It showed that there was no childhood for John Wesley. Susannah toughly disciplined her children in her attempt to save their souls. She was the general of an army of little Christian soldiers. In the absence of her husband she held meetings in her home for own children, neighbors and friends of the Parish. She was the mother of Methodism. She was the mother of John perhaps the world’s greatest evangelist and teacher since the days of St. Paul: and the mother of Charles, perhaps the world’s greatest singer since David sang his songs to Israel.

Susannah Wesley’s Background (1669-1742)

Miss Susannah Wesley was born in 1669. Her Father, Dr. Samuel Annesley, was a preacher at St. Giles Cripplegate Church in London until he died in 1696. Susannah Wesley’s parents were from the Dissenters in England, but she got converted to high Tory Anglicanism after she got married to Samuel Wesley. However, her husband's ancestors were highly puritans which she virtually adapted in her life as well¹. Susannah got married to Samuel Wesley in November 1688 during the 'Glorious Revolution;' Samuel, her husband, was 23 years while she was 19 years when they got married. Her husband Samuel was also a Minister until he died in Epworth². Samuel Wesley was a courageous and principled man, righteous, reaching the point of self-righteousness, and hot-headed, even though Susannah was more robust than him³.

Susannah gave birth to 19 children, and mostly girls. But it happened that, many of the children died at infancy, yet only ten survived till adulthood. She was fortunately left with

three sons and seven girls⁴. She severely faced and managed poverty and a difficult marital home. There was a time at the early part of her marriage that, her husband was apprehended by authorities for refusing to pay his debt in 1705⁵. With such challenges, Susannah remained a pious, loving mother, devoted wife, and loved by the parishioners, her husband was in charge of the church as a Priest. She was an educated woman who took reading as a hobby despite her busy schedule⁶. Susannah was intelligent, diligent, neat, and quite an organized woman

Susannah Wesley's intellectual ability and special knowledge did not end in her home as she extended the trait to the parishioners. She organized religious meetings in the rectory, which the parishioners delighted in, as against the services organized in the church⁷. She was a strong woman, and self-willed; despite her strenuous activities and the challenge of frequent childbirth, she was still vital to find time to read widely⁸. Susannah Wesley was hospitable; welcomed even the black sheep of the parish. Her friendliness was so much that one day her husband discovered she had entertained a nobleman's 'beauteous mistress.' Susannah can be summarized as a wonderful Mother, Theologian, wife, and Housekeeper. She died at the age of 73 years on August 23, 1742.

Susannah Wesley's Godly Model of Parenting

Susannah Wesley discovered that Parenting is a call, and she lived to fulfill that aspiration. Stephen Tomkins referred to her as an expert in raising children⁹. The following were some of the principles she displayed.

i. She was contented, committed to the call and spent quality time with the children

Susannah Wesley was contented and committed to her duties of loving and guiding her children unto the way of God. Commitment is a proof of love while contentment is a show of the fact that, one is comfortable with what he/she has at the moment. Susannah Wesley proved it by enduring difficult marriage that was hard to manage. She faced the difficulty squarely and dealt with it. Her situation differed widely compared with what some women of this century do. A lot of women are reported to have abandoned their matrimonial homes today because they cannot stand the pains and pressure of managing a marriage that is faced with difficulties.

Susannah proved that Parenting is a call and that; it should be done with the will of God. She took parenting as a God given assignment that must be obeyed, because, one will give account of it to God. She said, "...though I am neither a man nor a minister, yet if my heart was sincerely devoted to God, and I was inspired with a true zeal of his glory, I might do somewhat more than I do...I resolved to begin with my children..." She added that the Parent and God work together to save the soul of the child; and that any parent

who is not connected to this calling is doing the works of the Devil and "...makes Christian religion impracticable, salvation unattainable; and does all that in him lies to damn his child, soul and body forever" ¹⁰.

Susannah Wesley was so committed to the zeal of the call when she said, if she had 20 sons, she would advise all of them to become missionaries in Georgia. Her commitment made her come up with the theology of 'conquering the will of the child.' The child's folly is supposed to be driven out, and the only way is to conquer his will but has to be done systematically. John Wesley wrote in his journal as quoting her, "In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will and bring them to an obedient temper...whenever a child is corrected, it must be conquered"¹¹. This shows the level of commitment in order to make sure the best comes out of a child. Susannah was not just strict on the children, but, also employed some levels of softness. She formed a law that when a child does well, he or she should be rewarded; this encourages the child¹². She also maintained the bond of love in the family, even in her husband's absence, and protected her family from the negative influence of the system going on in England at the time. Most of these principles helped John Wesley during his university days. He remained quite exceptional from his contemporaries¹³.

On many occasions, what keeps children waiting is having quality time with them. This helps one to listen, share, guide and counsel them effectively. Susannah Wesley displayed her love, affection, commitment and spent a lot of quality time with her children, in the form of reading and instructing them as a devotional time with God and quite acceptable before him¹⁴. She created time for personal and group discussion with a child every night. One of her letters found in John Wesley's journal dated February 6, 1712, states, "...On Monday, I talk with Molly; on Tuesday with Hetty; Wednesday with Nancy; Thursday with Jacky; Friday with Patty; Saturday with Charles; and with Emily and Suky together on Sunday"¹⁵. That could why they grew up matured.

ii. She displayed exceptional potentials, and inculcated spiritual discipline in her children.

Most diligent parents are fond of identifying their children with potentials, gifts, skills, and God's direction upon their lives. There was a fire incident in the old Rectory of the Wesleyans when John was five (5) and was fortunately rescued. Susannah was so sensitive enough to notice God's unique gift and grace upon John Wesley, and she became a guide towards that in making him fulfill the purpose of God in his life¹⁶. John Wesley was commonly also referred to as 'A brand, plucked out of the fire'. This occurrence became a favorite children's story in England¹⁷. After two years of the fire incidence, Susannah resolved, and she was quoted to write, 'I do intend to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child, that Thou hast so mercifully provided for, than ever I have

been, that I may endeavor to instill into his mind the principles of true Christianity and virtue. Lord, give me the grace to do it sincerely and prudently and bless my attempts with good success!"¹⁸.

Consequently, God heard her prayer; she was successful to a great extent. Another instance where it was found evident towards her commitment to John Wesley's fulfilling his spiritual aspirations was when he was about to be ordained. It was discovered that she influenced him to begin the pastoral work in the church in his early years, which his father wanted the ordination delayed¹⁹. She desired that the ordination should take place as soon as possible. She was quoted to have said, '...the sooner you are a deacon, the better, because it may be an inducement to greater application in the study of practical divinity, which of all other studies I humbly conceive to be best for candidates for orders' ²⁰. She also influenced him to allow women to preach during the Methodist movement²¹.

Susannah Wesley was a committed prayerful woman who prays for each of her children daily; this was evident in John Wesley's letters to her dated February 28, 1732, "In many things, you have interceded for me and prevailed...." ²². She taught the children to learn the Lord's Prayer as soon as they start to talk²³. The Lord's prayer was said when one rises from the bed in the morning and at night before going to bed, also to pray privately before breakfast and to pray for their parents. The act of praise in worship was to be said daily through reading and singing from the Psalms. The children were made to discover the importance of Sunday as Sabbath day, which should be known as a holy day, and that it should be considered differently from other days as they join the family prayers²⁴.

Susannah taught her children not to relate with the villagers; (The United Methodist Church). This was a good one because of the setting of the moral decadence that was going on in Epworth, an unsteady market town. The eighteenth century was a world full of discoveries. It was a moment based on "intellectual crisis;" (The United Methodist Church) and a period of increasing prosperity. A season of the dual situation of change and continuity, gambling, drinking, poverty, and disease was raging ²⁶. The gravity of poverty made children suffer brutal treatment; 75 percent died before their fifth birthday²⁷. Her husband had experienced several attacks from his parishioners²⁸, which can be connected with the fire incidence; this proved that the setting was not suitable to raise godly children; it took excellent efforts both morally and spiritually to achieve that. Susannah emphasized the principle of respect for each other among the children. They were to call each other 'Sister' or 'brother' before the name of each of them. Talking to servants should be polite when they need anything and should always use 'please'²⁹. And respecting each other's private possessions was to be considered as well³⁰. Respect for the name of God was also to be adhered to; they were not to use the name of the Lord in vain, neither to swear, curse, be rude, use filthy language, or use bad names should be heard. ³¹

Susannah Wesley's children were taught to fear the rod and cry inaudibly; there was no room for unnecessary crying. They were to behave as if there were no children in the house³². They were to eat whatever that is set before them to eat, with no selection of meals. No wonder they quickly took medicine when they were sick. They could not have everything they cried for; three meals were to be taken every day without eating in between; only when a child was sick would they be allowed to take a snack³³.

Susannah Wesley came up with a rule in her home for the children, who checked practicing honesty. One should confess his or her faults and keep promises made³⁴. When one admitted or confessed and promised not to do it again, there will not be punishment or receive beating³⁵. As infants, the children observed siesta in the morning for three hours and in the afternoon. She scheduled evening prayers by 6 pm, dinner by 7 pm as followed by a bath, and by 8 pm, everyone should be in bed³⁶.

Early Childhood Parenting of her Children

Susannah Wesley did not attend any formal theological school, but she could be called a noble Theologian. She developed her theology from her commitment, dedication and devotion to God and the Bible. She passed this attitude over to her children in honesty. Henry Bet commented that she was one of the best mothers, "a woman of the strong and spiritual mind, exceptionally well educated for her century, a lover of Pascal and George Herbert, resolute and yet gentle, singularly wise in her counsels to her children, and greatly beloved by them"³⁷. She was also excellent in the Apostles Creed more than her husband³⁸. She exposed her children to sound education system early in life to learn to read at five³⁹. As a beginner, the child learns for six hours daily during the tutoring session and learns foreign languages⁴⁰.

Susannah taught her son, John Wesley, the theology of the Holy Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This was mentioned in his letters dated February 28, 1732; thus, "One consideration is enough to make me assert to his and your judgment concerning the holy sacrament;...that we cannot allow Christ's human nature to be present in it...either CONTRANS- substantiation⁴¹. She also exposed her children to philosophy, especially in John Wesley. In his letters to his mother dated June 18, 1725, he said, "You have so well satisfied me as to the tenets of Thomas a' Kempis that I have ventured to trouble you once more on more dubious subjects...."⁴². She concentrated on equipping the girl child. Moreover, she had seven girls out of ten (10) children to take care of. The girls were taught to sew at an early age, as coupled with learning reading. Each girl should know how to read very well before she can learn to work. John Wesley quoted his mother thus, "...for putting children to learn sewing before they can read perfectly is the very reason why so few women can read fit to be heard and never to be well understood⁴³.

Unarguably, Susannah Wesley was indeed a model that can be considered for Parenting. The following were evidence of her fruitful efforts in the lives of the children: John Wesley, at the age of ten (10), got a scholarship at Charterhouse in London the Duke of Buckingham. He became excellent in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew (Rack 50). Samuel, the eldest son, became a Priest and an intelligent scholar. Susannah, the eldest of the girls, was gifted, Martha was brilliant, Emilia was into literary works, Mary became a Linguist, Anne was also known as Nancy, had a happy marriage, Hetty, who was also known as Mehetabel, was good in Greek and had the gift of a psychic⁴³.

Effects of Ungodly Parenting

Ungodly parenting could be said to be damaging behavior traits that are characterized by neglect, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse that arose from ineffective parenting. These are things that should be immediately addressed by professional help. For example, according to Sharron Frederick, a psychotherapist, at Clarity Health Solutions, children who have little or no discipline are left to fend for themselves, which can result in injuries and also creates a child who does not understand boundaries. Similarly, withdrawing attention or affection could lead to ungodly parenting in that, ignoring a child is telling them that your love is conditional. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/define.pdf>⁴⁷

The economic situation has become so bad that parents have to work hard for ends to meet and have no time for the spiritual and moral life of the children. Consequently, some youths have resorted to kidnapping, internet fraud, illegal migration, robbery, all these has become a threat to the society especially in many third world countries such as Nigeria.

Theological Reflections for Godly Parenting

It is important to have God's knowledge and way of Parenting in our daily activities. Parenting goes beyond having biological or adopted children. The Almighty God is the overall parent, and as such, parent should learn from Him in every way so as to bring up their children in Godly manner. God's love for His Son, Jesus Christ, the Israelites, and all believers is eternal (Exod. 4:22; Deut. 32:6; John 3:16). God is both Father and Mother to his earthly children. The most common parent figure referred to God in the Bible is Father. Jesus often referred to God as his Father and our Father which he taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father..." (Matt. 6:9; John 20:17; Mk. 14:36).

It is expected that, Parent, Mother, or Father is expected to imitate the image and character of God in Parenting, bearing the role of Father and mother just like God. Parents should announce their presence in the midst of their children at all times by the positive role they play. When Jesus was on earth, he depended on God the Father for everything, likewise, children also depend on their parents for everything, both physically and

spiritually. Therefore, following God's model of Parenting is the only most important way to raise godly children for the sustenance and practice of the Christian faith.

The church needs to develop, practice and sustain the theology of godly parenting to overcome the challenges of our time. This dispensation has similarities with the situation of the 18th century during the times of Susannah Wesley when waywardness was the order of the day. Susannah Wesley's principles of Parenting have some similarities with child upbringing in Nigeria. However, it has to be applied universally; because Parenting is universal, the church is universal, one body in Christ, one Faith, one God, and Father of all (Eph. 4:4-6).

Children are gifts and rewards from God, and they are to become warriors that stand to guide their faith (Ps. 127:3). Every gift from God to man is attached with responsibility. This normally takes place when God entrusts life into your hands; basically, "children are a trust" (Wesley "The Works of John Wesley Addresses, Essays, Letters" 13). God expects man to take care of his creation (Gen. 2:15), including the man created in his image and likeness. God gave parents the responsibility to train up children in the way they should go so that when they are grown up, it remains with them (Pro. 22:6). The moment one becomes a parent, it shows he or she has signed a deal with God, it is responding to the call "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us... Here am I send me..." (Isa. 6:8). The biblical account of Mary and Joseph, and Elizabeth and John, gives clear evidence that Parenting is a call. Moreover, they fulfilled the calling and mandate God gave them. They raised great men; Jesus Christ, as man, followed through the stages of growth as guided by his earthly parents, and fulfilled his calling on earth. The same with John the Baptist's parents who took the call with fear and diligence, eventually John fulfilled his call on earth (Luke 1:26- 38). Mary answered the call, "I am the Lord's servant...May it is to me as you have said..." (Luke 1:26-38).

Answering a call is a commitment; it is a task, a duty, and a responsibility that God has given that needs to be well cared for, to whom much is given, much is expected (Lk. 12:48). The commitment will cause the parents to love and care for the children, spent time with them, counsel, guide, and educate them. "It is the best of jobs if taken seriously. It is the most difficult of jobs if carelessly handled. It can bring you the greatest joy. It can cause the greatest pain. There is nothing as fulfilling and exhilarating. There is nothing so depleting and exhausting" (Wesley "Volume XII" 13); John Wesley added that men are co-workers together with God. The reward of Parenting is ours, while the glory belongs to God. Susannah Wesley upheld that, it is a task that someday one will give account for; it is to be considered as doing God's will; it should be taken as a religion that should be handled with zeal, commitment, and devotion.

The reward is sometimes seen here on earth; men glorify God and compliment the efforts of committed parents. As a Christian parent, one is a co-owner of a business with God; and God is not a joker. A call needs to be guided; one trains himself for this noble task, one cannot give what he or she does not have. It demands training oneself from the Scriptures and through other godly means. (I Tim. 4:7). It therefore, brings to knowledge that, when Christian parents consider Parenting as a call, there and then, there will be hope for the children and the church in the world. In every living family set-up, children remain the first constituency. It is important that parents take it upon themselves to first win their children that will join the society in their life time. In the words of Harold J. Sala; "The world's greatest mission field is not the dark continent of Africa, nor is it the highlands of Papua New Guinea or the jungles of South America...The greatest mission field today is the hearts of our children" (Wesley 'Volume XII 13).

Susannah prayed for her children, and she prevailed. Prayer is the place where there is victory over the troubles and pressures of the child; and a place where wills can be conquered. The African child in the 21st century is pressured through any means; as earlier stated, they are troubled and sometimes cannot talk to anybody about it. However, through prayers, God will teach them himself and grant them his great peace (Isa. 54:13). When parents develop praying for the children, it is "seeking the presence of God and releasing the power of God," which becomes the means to help the child overcome whatsoever challenges of life and circumstances that may come⁴⁶

Parenting involves training, teaching, modeling, guiding, and equipping souls. Psalms 127: 4 says, "Like arrows in the hand of a warrior... So are the children of one's youth...But shall speak with their enemies in the gate". This is one of the most important reasons there is need for effective and fruitful Parenting for the future of godly children. Parents have been given the responsibility by God to equip their children for the glory of the church.

There is a need to teach them how to raise personal Altars. The place of prayer is the place of raising spiritual antennas, surveillance cameras, and Satellites that can help them dictate both the physical and spiritual enemy of the church as they stand in the gate. Teaching our children to pray will sustain them throughout their lifetime so that they can influence the world in a godly manner and will become the "tomorrow decision-makers." A child should be equipped to handle the challenge of unemployment, bad economy, secularism, etc. Education is power; lack of knowledge is a weapon of mass destruction (Hos. 4:6).

Conclusion

The study concludes that, Susannah Wesley was an epitome of honesty and justice who raised great men of faith in church history. Also, that, Susannah Wesley's model of raising godly children should not be restricted to the training of pastors in the Seminaries alone, but should be encouraged in public theology, homes and churches. Susannah Wesley's model of parenting theology should be properly harnessed as it is a means of passing the Faith to the next generations.

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