John Wesley on the Formative Reading of Scripture and Educating Children

PHILIP McKinney II

Phil McKinney II serves with his wife (Angie) and three daughters (Kaylee, Taylor, and Rylie) as the Discipleship Minister at the Fairfax Church of Christ in Fairfax, Virginia. His 21 years of ministry experience in northwest and central Arkansas and northern Virginia have given him a unique look at the way ministries and churches serve the Lord and disciple others for Christ. Phil also teaches as an adjunct professor for Harding University, Harding School of Theology, and Toccoa Falls College. He holds degrees from Harding University, Harding School of Theology, and a Ph.D. from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

In the last decade, research has demonstrated that today’s Christian teens believe in the Word of God. For instance, a 2005 Gallop Youth Survey reported that 39% of Protestant and Catholic teens surveyed said that the Bible is the “actual word of God” and should be taken literally; 46% said that the Bible is the “inspired word of God” but believed that not everything should be taken literally in its pages; and 14% said that the Bible is just an “ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man.” In another study, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) reported that about one-third of Protestant teens (32%) read their Bibles by themselves at least once a week or more. These statistics alone would suggest that we are raising children who believe in God’s Word. Unfortunately, belief in the truthfulness of Scripture does not equate to being transformed by it.

In the same study conducted through the NSYR, researchers found that reading the Bible once a week or more did not necessarily bring teens closer to God. These teens believe in God and that he is personally involved in people’s lives. They generally believe in the afterlife, angels, miracles, and a judgment day. Sixty percent say that faith is very or extremely important in shaping how they live their lives and seven out of ten of these teens report having committed to live their lives for God. Yet, these same teens (who appear very religious and committed to God) also report that they do not feel very or extremely close to God (56%) and there are still some 40% of the teens surveyed who do not feel that faith is very important in shaping their lives.

What might these statistics tell us? We could simply say, “Job well done.” Or, we could look at them and realize that we might be raising individuals who believe in Scripture, but this belief has very little to do with forming their relationship with God.

Could this be because we have approached Scripture as a textbook rather than the Word of Life? We approach textbooks informationally. They are there for reference when in need. They provide us valuable information only for particular subjects and we rarely read them in their entirety. Instead, we approach them
to gain only the bolded, italicized information that is most pertinent to our task at hand (i.e. passing the test). Typically, textbooks have a negative connotation in our minds and they are not something we see as life changing nor are they something we pick up everyday.

If we approach Scripture in this fashion, then we will find children and teens that only go to Scripture when they have a question they cannot answer. They will look for the “bold, italicized” passages that are most pertinent to the questions they have and then will return the book to its shelf to be referenced at a later date. Scripture will be seen in a negative fashion as a book of rules and regulations that they do not like and filled with stories that are out of date and have no bearing on their lives.

In direct contrast to a “textbook, informational” approach to Scripture is reading God’s Word formationally. In this information-laden age, when data is manipulated and controlled, it is difficult to help children and teens understand that Scripture is not to be controlled, but instead should control, form, and shape them. Mulholland believes that formational reading is a way in which we encounter the God who spoke us into being and continues to speak us into the image of Christ for the sake of others. According to Mulholland, “Spiritual or formational reading is the exact opposite of informational reading.” He goes on to say,

Instead of coming to the text with our agenda, we come in a posture of openness to God’s agenda. We read attentively, seeking not to cover as much as possible as quickly as possible but to plumb the depths of the text so that the text may plumb the depths of our being and doing. Rather than an analytical approach, we take a contemplative posture that is open to ambiguity and mystery. The final goal of spiritual reading is to be mastered by God for the fulfillment of God’s purposes in us and through us.

Is it time to reconsider how we approach Scripture with our children and teens? Instead of waiting till they become adults to instruct them in the formational reading of Scripture, perhaps we should begin the process as early as possible. John Wesley seems to have had some sense of formational reading of Scripture, and he urged parents to engage their children early in such diligent reading:

But does it follow, that we ought not to instill true religion into the minds of children as early as possible? Or, rather, that we should do it with all diligence from the very time that reason dawns, laying line upon line, precept upon precept, as soon and as fast as they are able to bear it? By all means. Scripture, reason, and experience jointly testify that, inasmuch as the corruption of nature is earlier than our instructions can be, we should take all pains and care to counteract this corruption as early as possible.

Perhaps we can learn from individuals like John Wesley. Wesley was deliberate in his efforts to aid individuals in the process of Christian formation and he firmly believed that the formative reading of Scripture was vital to this process. Moreover, the education of children using Scripture as a guide was a conduit for Christian formation according to Wesley. Wesley is not commonly known for his interest in educating children, yet history demonstrates his deep interest in religious education for the primary purpose of helping children (and all humankind) grow into the image of Christ.

John Wesley’s engagement of Scripture and religious education with children has been thought of as rigid and harsh at times (as will be demonstrated below). However, it may more adequately fit the category of formative reading of Scripture for training in the image of God. A more adequate interpretation of Wesley’s methods could lead to a more intentional approach toward the formative reading of Scripture with children for the intent of Christian formation and discipleship. This article will seek to discover the treasures found in Wesley’s formative approach to Scripture. It will also seek to discover how Wesley’s religious education methods and emphasis on Scripture could aid churches and schools to lead children and teens to an engagement with Scripture that will be more formative rather than informative.
JOHN WESLEY ON THE FORMATIVE READING OF SCRIPTURE

John Wesley, the principal founder of the Methodist movement in the eighteenth-century, was deeply concerned about the process of shaping individuals into the image of Christ. An integral part of his spiritual development process was the formative reading of Scripture. Wesley believed that through Scripture one comes to know God and that knowledge and understanding of Scripture would form one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength toward holiness. He believed that Scripture pointed the way to heaven and therefore he made a self-proclamation to be “a man of one book.” He goes on to say,

I want to know one thing, — the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.

Wesley believed that one could participate in God’s redemptive work through what he called “the means of grace.” He believed that these “means of grace” were channels whereby God presents His grace. Although the means were not an end in and of themselves, they were a way in which an individual could be an active participant in the process of sanctification and justification. He speaks to these “means of grace” by saying, “By ‘means of grace’ I understand outward signs, words, or actions, ordained of God, and appointed for this end, to be the ordinary channels whereby he might convey to men, preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.”

According to Wesley, these means included: (1) Prayer, (2) Searching the Scriptures, (3) the Lord’s Supper, (4) Fasting, and (5) Christian Conference. In these five, Wesley stressed that the chief of these means were three:

(i.) Reading: Constantly, some part of every-day; regularly, all the Bible in order; carefully, with the Notes; seriously, with prayer before and after; fruitfully, immediately practicing what you learn there?
(ii.) Meditating: At set times? by any rule?
(iii.) Hearing: Every morning? carefully; with prayer before, at, after; immediately putting in practice? Have you a New Testament always about you?

As in many other areas of Christian formation, Wesley had a methodological approach to reading Scripture formationally. As we have already noted, Wesley believed that one must engage the Bible through (1) reading, (2) meditating, and (3) hearing. Yet, his methodology toward formative reading went much deeper. In the preface of his Notes on the Old Testament, Wesley comments on his deep love for the Bible and the means by which he designed his commentary. His purpose was not to simply provide a reader with information concerning God’s Word, but help in the area of understanding and meaning. He hoped that one could simply approach the “naked” text and find God’s message clearly. He states,

I design only, like the hand of a dial, to point every man to This: not to take up his mind with something else, how excellent soever: but to keep his eye fixt upon the naked Bible, that he may read and hear it with understanding. I say again, (and desire it may be well observed, that none may expect what they will not find). It is not my design to write a book, which a man may read separate from the Bible: but barely to assist those who fear God, in hearing and reading the Bible itself, by shewing the natural sense of every part, in as few and plain words as I can.
He goes on to share that he does not intend to keep one from the process of thinking. Instead, he hopes to assist individuals in thinking more deeply and critically (formationally) about God’s Word. Therefore, he sets out to write in a way that both learned and “ignorant men” could gain understanding of the Bible for the purpose of growth and Christian formation. He clearly writes on his belief on how to understand the things of God (the Bible):

This is the way to understand the things of God; *Meditate thereon day and night; So shall you attain the best knowledge; even to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent.* And this knowledge will lead you, *to love Him, because he hath first loved us; yea, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.* Will there not then be all that mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus? And in consequence of this, while you joyfully experience all the holy tempers described in this book, you will likewise be outwardly *holy as He that hath called you is holy,* in all manner of conversation.

There are several points that Wesley makes here. First, to formatively engage Scripture one must *meditate* upon it day and night. This meditation is the constant repetition of God’s Word through the day so that His very words will bring one to know God: Father, Son, and Spirit. As the psalmist wrote, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.” The psalmist believed that meditation brought about understanding and knowledge. That knowledge would then lead one to *love* God according to Wesley. This love would not be a surface nor passing love. Instead, one would come to love God as he loved us (with everything: heart, soul, mind, and strength). One cannot love God in this way without knowing God intimately through his Word. Knowing God and Christ in this way is to truly have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). This intimacy will form one’s “holy tempers” in a way that will transform their entire life and actions.

Now, it is important to help us understand what Wesley meant by “holy tempers.” Wesley used the word “tempers” to describe our very nature and character. He believed that who we are deep inside guides our words and actions. Therefore, corrupted “tempers” would then cause a flow of sinful words and actions from our hearts. In order to be shaped truly into the image of Christ, one must deal with the problem of sin at a much deeper level. Wesley’s “mature definition of Christian life placed primary emphasis on this inward dimension, the recovery of holy tempers, from which would flow holy words and actions.” In other words, the formative reading of Scripture would engage and transform one’s very core (their very self). This is what Wesley said would lead one in the way toward Christian perfection.

Having established his view on the Bible and its ability to transform, Wesley provides the “how” to read Scripture formationally. He gives his readers six pieces of advice toward engaging God’s Word:

1. To set apart a little time, if you can, every morning and evening for that purpose?
2. At each time if you have leisure, to read a chapter out of the Old, and one out of the New Testament: if you cannot do this, to take a single chapter, or a part of one?
3. To read this with a single eye, to know the whole will of God, and a fixt resolution to do it?
4. Have a constant eye to the *analogy of faith*; the connexion and harmony there is between those grand, fundamental doctrines, Original Sin, Justification by Faith, the New Birth, Inward and Outward Holiness.
5. Serious and earnest prayer should be constantly used, before we consult the oracles of God, seeing “scripture can only be understood thro’ the same Spirit whereby ‘it was given.’ Our reading should likewise be closed with prayer, that what we read may be written on our hearts.
6. It might also be of use, if while we read, we were frequently to pause, and examine ourselves by what we read, both with regard to our hearts, and lives. This would furnish us with matter
of praise, where we found God had enabled us to conform to his blessed will, and matter of humiliation and prayer, where we were conscious of having fallen short. And whatever light you then receive, should be used to the uttermost, and that immediately. Let there be no delay. Whatever you resolve, begin to execute the first moment you can. So shall you find this word to be indeed the power of God unto present and eternal salvation.\textsuperscript{23}

Let us now examine each of these methods for Bible reading to determine what might be useful for the formative reading of Scripture today.

**TIME**

The first thing that Wesley mentions is time. One must set aside specific times throughout their day to engage Scripture and allow it to engage them. Time also indicates that Bible study should be regular and consistent. In the same way that we know we will eat food in order to be properly nourished throughout our days, we need to have a steady diet of God’s Word in order to be spiritually nourished. This time must be “set apart” as well. Therefore, it is important to (as much as possible) study the Bible without distractions, both outwardly (an environment without distractions or interruptions) and inwardly (letting go of the stresses of life in order to be open to God’s message).

Part of the aspect of time also includes giving God your best time.\textsuperscript{24} To truly allow for formative reading, one must engage it when they are most alert and attentive to its message. Unfortunately, we often approach Bible study when we are most depleted. Our emotions are spent and we no longer have the ability think clearly. In essence, we give God our “leftover” time and expect that it will be enough. This is when we are truly searching the Scriptures out of obligation rather than expectation. Yet, to truly allow the Spirit of God to inspire us through the Word, we must give the best time we have. Whether that is the morning or evening or somewhere in the middle, our best time is needed for approaching Scripture formationally.

**WHOLE OF SCRIPTURE**

Second, read portions from both the Old and New Testaments. If one cannot do this, he encourages them to delve deeply into one portion of the Bible. There are three things to take note of here: (1) Wesley engaged the entire Bible. He did not limit himself to only the New Testament. He wanted to warn his readers not to fall into the habit of many Christians and neglect the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{25} Reading the entire Protestant canon was (and is) vital to spiritual growth and maturity.\textsuperscript{26} (2) Wesley encourages his readers to work through the entire Bible, not just the passages that we like the most. We often find ourselves returning over and over again to the same passages that have helped us grow spiritually. Yet, we are missing vital lessons the Spirit may need to teach us in order to move us on in our journey toward spiritual maturity. (3) Wesley indicates here that we should engage Scripture in smaller portions. Reading large portions of the Bible each day will only lead to informational reading. In contrast, we should read smaller portions so that we can digest and meditate on them properly.

**WHOLE WILL OF GOD**

Third, Wesley instructs that we should read “with a single eye, to know the whole will of God, and a fixt resolution to do it.” This is a critical component in the formative reading of Scripture. There are a few things to understand in this instruction: (1) Reading formationally should focus on knowing the whole will of God. That means that we come to our study in openness to what God wants for our lives in every aspect. As Mulholland notes, “To read the scripture in this focused way is to bring the whole of our life before God and to seek expectantly and receptively God’s will for everything in our living.”\textsuperscript{27} (2) Wesley instructs his readers to put into practice God’s will that has been made known to them. This is a call to obedience. Throughout Scripture, God instructs His children to not only hear and know His Word, but to put it into practice through love and obedience.\textsuperscript{28}

**ANALOGY OF FAITH**

Fourth, Wesley stresses that one should “have a constant
eye to the analogy of faith.” He explains that this “analogy of faith” consists of the fundamental doctrines of faith. What Wesley is saying is that there are truths in Scripture that are found from beginning to end; truths that are consistent and a part of God’s overall redemptive plan. These fundamental truths, or analogy of faith, are to be viewed in harmony. Wesley’s truths always centered on: Original Sin, Justification by Faith, the New Birth, Inward and Outward Holiness.

Through church history, this “analogy of faith” was also known as the “rule of faith” passed down from church fathers such as Augustine. The “rule of faith” (or “analogy of faith”) “gathered the early church’s communal sense of what was most central and unifying in Scripture, to serve in part as an aid for reading the whole of Scripture in its light.”29 The “rule of faith” came in several forms, but each conveyed a summary of God’s redemptive work as demonstrated through Scripture (the Apostles’ Creed is one such example). The “rule of faith” became a source of contention during the Reformation as Reformers stressed that “Scripture alone” was the rule of faith. Yet, Protestants also believed that there were central and unifying themes found in Scripture of God’s redemptive plan that should be used as a lens when interpreting God’s Word. Therefore, they changed the name to “analogy of faith.”30 As Maddox notes, “they typically defended under this label the practice of consulting at least the Apostles’ Creed when seeking to interpret Scripture correctly.”31

Wesley inherited this understanding of interpretation from his Anglican roots and therefore employed this principle in his formative method of reading Scripture. It is important to note here that although Wesley claimed to be a “man of one book,” he viewed and interpreted the Bible through unifying lenses (e.g. the Apostle’s Creed) in order to understand what the authors of Scripture really meant. The point he is stressing here is that one should approach Scripture as a unified whole that maps God’s redemptive purpose and will for humankind. Everything that one reads in Scripture should be viewed through the lens of God’s saving and redemptive plan. One caution: It is easy to fall into a trap of viewing God’s Word too systematically and “pigeon holing” the Bible into nice and neat categories.

This can lead to an informational/functional approach to Scripture reading. In contrast to this trap, “we must realize that in reading the scripture we are engaged with a living and holistic Reality, who seeks to form our lives into wholeness of being and doing.”32

**PRAYER**

Fifth, Wesley emphasizes the importance of coupling formative Bible study with prayer. Part of Wesley’s process of searching the Scriptures always included the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Wesley believed that in the same way the Spirit guided the process of the writing of Scripture, so also the Spirit guides one toward clarity of thought and understanding in searching God’s Word. As Blevins says, “When confronted with difficult passages, Wesley would first turn to divine guidance...”33 In a letter to the Bishop of Gloucester, Wesley writes on this reliance of the Spirit’s guidance by quoting Thomas à Kempis, “I do firmly believe, (and what serious man does not?) omnis scriptura legi debet eo Spiritu quo scripta est: ‘We need the same Spirit to understand the Scripture, which enabled the holy men of old to write it.’”34 Maddox points out that when Wesley sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he did not do so apart from Scripture. Instead, he prayed and asked the Spirit to aid him in reflecting upon Scripture in order to enlighten his understanding of the meaning of God’s Word.35 This guidance is for the purpose of training God’s children in righteousness (as he preached often from 2 Timothy 3:16) and to move them forward in the process of being transformed into the image of Christ. In his explanatory notes on 2 Timothy 3:16, Wesley wrote:

> The Spirit of God not only once inspired those who wrote it, but continually inspires, supernaturally assists, those that read it with earnest prayer. Hence it is so profitable for doctrine, for instruction of the ignorant, for the reproof or conviction of them that are in error or sin, for the correction or amendment of whatever is amiss, and for instructing or training up the children of God in all righteousness.36

Wesley believed that transformation into the image
of Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit. He wanted to encourage his readers to not only read God’s Word, but to seek the Spirit’s guidance in their *formative* reading of Scripture. As we have seen, he firmly believed that understanding Scripture conceptually was vital in this process. However, his deepest concern was more *formational* rather than *informative*. He desired a more personal embrace of the truth found in God’s Word for the purpose of forming an individual into Christ’s image. “The Spirit’s inspiring work is essential at this point.”

Wesley did not believe that a mere rational engagement of Scripture would suffice. A personal embrace of the Bible as God’s saving truth was a gift from “which must be nurtured by continuing reliance on the inspiring work of the Spirit.”

**REFLECT AND RESPOND**

Finally, Wesley ends with encouraging his readers to stop and reflect on what they have read. This indicates Wesley’s firm belief that not only do we examine Scripture, but also that Scripture examines us. This also indicates the need for individuals to open themselves up to Scripture in order to be addressed by God and His Word. This cross-examination will delve into the depths of our outer actions and inner being. Again, he tells his readers to pause frequently. Do not be consumed with the amount of Scripture you read and how fast you read it. Instead, one should frequently pause in order to allow for this cross-examination. This will draw one deeper into the depths of the text and will allow the text to delve deeper into the recesses of one’s heart. “Instead of informing the text with our own agenda, we present the inner and outer dynamics of our life to be formed by the text. Instead of trying to bring the text under our control, we allow the text to take control of our being and doing.”

Once one has allowed for an appropriate cross-examination of the text and self, then they are then to act immediately upon what they have received. Here, Wesley indicates that to allow the Scripture to truly sink into the depths of one’s soul, he or she needs to act upon it. In other words, the Word must immediately become the Living Word as was demonstrated through Jesus Christ. This is a vital part of the Christian formation process. The more we know the mind of Christ, the more we live Christ; and the more we live Christ, the more we are Christ (him living in us) to the world and its inhabitants. In essence, we become the word God speaks forth in his world.

Wesley stresses the immediacy of acting on the word by saying “immediately,” “Let there be no delay,” “begin to execute the first moment you can.” If we do not begin to act upon the very Word that engaged us, then we will struggle with using it to engage the world. As humans, our tendency is to simply read and absorb. This is indicative of our informational approach to reading. However, a formational approach cuts us to the core and motivates every aspect of our being into doing. As James tells us, “faith without deeds is dead.” It is evident that Wesley believed that if the Word did not become the Living Word through us, then we would simply allow those life giving lessons of Scripture to drift away into obscurity. This approach to Scripture leaves one no more transformed into the image of Christ than they were before reading the text. The formative reading of God’s Word must always be accompanied by action and obedience or the reader has only absorbed information.

**CONSULTATION**

Before concluding this section, it is important to recognize that Wesley believed that formative reading was always done in consultation. Wesley consulted many resources in order to understand, be formed by, and act upon Scripture. Some of these we have already discussed, but before proceeding, let us take a moment to recognize each of these:

1. **Consult Others** – Wesley believed in consulting those who were more experienced in the things of God.
2. **Consult Other Writings** – Wesley read Scripture in connection with writings from the early Christians. “If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.”
3. **Consult the “Analogy of Faith”** – As we
discussed earlier, Scripture was to be interpreted through this lens.

4. Consult Nature – Wesley wrote on his understanding of creation in five volumes. In the preface of his work *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in Creation*, Wesley expresses that his intent is to examine and display “the invisible things of God, his power, wisdom, and goodness” as found in creation.\(^{44}\) His expressed desire was to study the natural world in order to strengthen his faith through Scripture.

These consultations provided support for Wesley’s understanding of Scripture. Although he was a “man of one book,” he consulted other sources to determine what God’s truth was and therefore allow that truth to transform him.

As we have seen so far, John Wesley provided a detailed understanding of the importance of God’s Word and its ability to change and form one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength. He also provided a formative methodological approach to reading Scripture that can be useful in the process of Christian formation today. This methodology permeated every aspect of Wesley’s life and may prove beneficial in teaching children and teens to read God’s Word formationally. As we will see, Wesley not only stressed Christian formation in adults, but was also adamant about it in children. He firmly believed that being formed in the image of Christ began as early as possible. We will now examine Wesley’s views on educating children and how his formative approach to Scripture influenced his educational methods.

**JOHN WESLEY ON EDUCATING CHILDREN**

John Wesley had a strong conviction to save children’s souls. Any suggestions or instructions Wesley provided for child rearing or education were always toward the goal of religious and spiritual growth.\(^{45}\) In order to accomplish this goal, he believed it was important to teach them from an early age. For Wesley, teaching in the home, the church, and in schools was vital to the Christian formation process. Therefore, Wesley placed the onus of Christian formation first on the parents and then on teachers.\(^{46}\) Felton points out:

Wesley realized that the home influenced the lives of children even before the church, and that parents were, for good or evil, the first religious teachers of their children. The foundations for subsequent spiritual development must be appropriately constructed in the context of family life...If children are to mature as faithful Christians, their nurture must continue in the Christian community.\(^{47}\)

With this conviction, Wesley set out to provide instructions for both parents and teachers toward a methodology of helping children grow in their knowledge of God and spiritual maturity. To this end, he wrote and preached on the subject often. Most notable is his sermon “On the Education of Children” (1783)\(^{48}\) (which he directed to parents for the purpose of emphasizing parental responsibility for religious education in the home) and his treatise “A Thought on the Manner of Educating Children” (1783)\(^{49}\) (which stressed the importance of discipline and true religion in any good education). In criticizing some of the education of his day, Wesley speaks on true religion and says,

With regard to the former, how few are there of those that undertake the education of children, who understand the nature of religion, who know what true religion is! Some of them supposing it to be barely the doing no harm, the abstaining from outward sin; some; the using the means of grace, saving our prayers, reading, good books, and the like; and others, the having a train of right opinions, which is vulgarly called faith. But all these, however common in the world, are gross and capital errors. *Unless religion be described as consisting in holy tempers; in the love of God and our neighbor; in humility, gentleness, patience, long-suffering, contentedness in every condition; to sum up all, in the image of God, in the mind that was in Christ; it is no wonder if these that are instructed therein are not better, but worse, than other men. For they think they have reli-
gion, when, indeed, they have none at all; and so add pride to all their other vices.\(^5\)

To Wesley, the sum or all education to children was forming them into the image of God, in the mind of Christ. Christian formation would then be evidenced through their holy tempers (see earlier discussion), through love of God and others, and through the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Felton states, “Education in the faith was crucially important for Wesley because it was an instrument by which persons were brought to conversion. Wesley believed in the capability of even young children to experience conversion.”\(^5\) Therefore, teaching and instruction should start early in childhood and have discipline and structure. This strong belief compelled Wesley to spend of good portion of his life dedicated to the teaching of children. This was evidenced through his writings (many of which were written solely for educational purposes) and through the programs/institutions of education that he established.

Wesley’s method of education was built upon two principles: sound religious training combined with perfect control of the children through discipline and structure.\(^5\) This method of education was evidenced in the Kingswood School. Many remembered the school for its strong religious element and rigorous schedule and discipline. Heitzenrater details the regimen at Kingswood:

The rules for the children at Kingswood meant rising at four a.m. and retiring at eight p.m.; starting the day with two hours of private and public devotion and ending the day with an hour of private devotion and an hour of public evening prayers; having no time during the day for play and spending from seven to eleven a.m. and one to five p.m. “in school.” Students should at all times be in the presence of a teacher and never be allowed to roam free or have contact with the collier’s children in the neighborhood.\(^5\)

Some criticized this structure and Wesley was thought to be too harsh and strict. They believed that Wesley lacked an understanding of children and therefore his educational approach to them was too severe and should not be a method used in education.\(^5\) Wesley himself took such criticism from a gentleman in conversation,

A gentleman with whom I was conversing a while ago, was speaking largely on the manner of educating children. He objected strongly to the bringing them up too strictly; to the giving them more of religion than they liked; to the telling them of it too often, or pressing it upon them whether they will or no…He thought that the common methods that are used in those that are called religious schools, of talking about divine things continually, and daily pressing it upon children, did abundantly more harm than good; especially if any severity were used: And concluded with saying, that those children who had been trained up in this manner, as soon as the restraint was taken off, were commonly worse than others.\(^5\)

Criticism did not deter Wesley from what he was doing nor from his convictions to save the souls of children in the manner he felt most prudent. He never waivered from his understanding of the purpose of religious education: “to instill in children true religion, holiness and the love of God and mankind and to train them in the image of God.”\(^5\) This passion for training and teaching children toward righteousness and Christian formation is admirable and necessary still today. However, it is important that parents and teachers infuse God’s love and grace in their training in righteousness in order to help children and teens understand why they are learning Scripture and how it deepens their relationship with God. God’s Word needs to be relevant to how they live and not just associated with rigorous rules, discipline, and structure.

Yet, Wesley’s emphasis on structure and instruction is not unlike that of ancient Jewish practices. Discipling in the Jewish home came first in the form of education—not education in the sense we have today, but for the purpose of developing the whole of a person for lifelong service to and worship of God. This goal was accomplished through knowledge of God by understanding His Word and by obeying everything the Word
(Law) commanded. obedient. Obedience was a product of loving God with all one’s heart, soul, and strength. Emil Schürer states this succinctly by saying,

The whole purpose of education in family, school and synagogue was to transform the Jewish people into “disciples of the Lord.” The ordinary man was to know, and do, what the Torah asked of him. His whole life was to conform to the precepts and commandments of the “Instruction” or “Enlightenment.” Obedience to these rules, which were firmly believed to have been laid down by God himself, was seen by Torah scholars, Pharisees and rabbis alike as the only way to put into practice the heavenly command, “You shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6).

The ultimate goal of this education (discipleship) was to develop the individual toward holy living (to be set apart for God in every aspect of life). The primary setting for this education was the home. Parents shared in this task, though the father bore the primary role of discipling his children. The home in Jewish thought was essentially a “small temple.” Wilson notes that, “Foundational to all theory on the biblical concept of family is the Jewish teaching that the home is more important than the synagogue. In Jewish tradition, the center of religious life has always been the home.”

God gave to parents the primary responsibility of passing on the faith to their children, and this happened largely in the home. Deuteronomy 6:7 instructs parents to disciple their children at home. These words were to be passed on to all the coming generations so that God’s people would never forget God, his commands, and most importantly his love for them. This was first and foremost the responsibility of the parents in the home. Verse 7 reads, “Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.” These “God-discussions” were to take place first in the home and then outside the home; from the beginning of the day to its end.

The home was only the primary setting for discipleship. The actual duty of discipling children belonged to the parents. In light of the home being a “small temple,” it should also be understood that parents were viewed as “priests” or “teachers” in that temple. It was therefore the responsibility of the parent (predominantly the father but in partnership with the mother) to provide instruction to the children in the same way a priest would instruct the Jews in the Torah within the holy Temple. However, in Jewish tradition, each parent fulfilled a specific role as priest in the home.

Wesley’s form of religious education reflects many of these practices found in the Jewish home. Wesley was passionate about helping children in the process of Christian formation and he firmly believed it was primarily the responsibility of the parents. Through his personal experiences, education, and theology, Wesley built a program and theory of educating children that was unique and often criticized. Yet, his concern for the spiritual welfare of children could not be dismissed. Though he was considered harsh, strict, and lacked understanding of children, Wesley pushed on in his endeavor to help children be formed into the image of God through the mind of Christ. He firmly believed that the formative reading of Scripture was foundational in this process and provided both children and adults several ways in which they could read God’s Word so that the Word could in turn read and change them. Even though Wesley took sharp criticism from some, perhaps there are some specific lessons we can learn from him and his methodology that will aid in the Christian formation process in children and teens today.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN FORMATION**

What are the “take-aways” from a study like this? Can we really learn anything from Wesley that we didn’t already know? I believe that understanding the principles laid out in this study by Wesley can aid parents and the church leaders today in several ways:

1. We must be intentional about the Christian formation process in children from a very early age.

   As Paul says in Ephesians 6:4, children are to be brought us in the training and instructions of the
Lord. What Paul says here to fathers and parents is reminiscent of instructions given to Israelite parents and the larger community in Deuteronomy 6:1-9 and later instructed in Psalm 78:1-8.

2. Parents hold the primary role in this process; yet, the Christian community is vital in aiding the process. As noted in the passages in number one, the command to instruct children in the ways of the Lord lay primarily in the hands of parents, especially fathers.

3. Scripture is crucial to the formative process and must be studied in both an informational and (more importantly) formational manner as described above. Scripture must not only be considered important and informational to children and teens (a sacred book to be respected but not digested), it must be transformational and taken in on a steady diet. As Paul notes, all need to be transformed by the renewing of the mind in order to test and approve what God’s will is (Romans 12:1-2). This approach to Scripture heightens the “renewal of the mind” process.

4. Perhaps a more structured and disciplined approach to the formative reading of Scripture and religious education (as outlined above) with children and teens is necessary. We do not allow the method to become the end, but we allow God’s Word to be a natural part of the daily walk of our children and teens to be a guide, a teacher, and a companion in life. As noted, Ephesian 6:4 commands fathers and parents to train (or perhaps a more accurate translation, “discipline”) and instruct children in the Lord. This implies a disciplined approach to religious education with Scripture being the guide.

5. We need to understand that children are headed toward the same end as all humankind unless they accept Christ as their Lord and Savior (Romans 3:21-26) and be transformed into His image (2 Corinthians 3:18). This discipline of regularly teaching through the Scripture must never be neglected and must remain our guiding principle.

Wesley’s deep passion for Scripture (“man of one book”) and involvement in the education of children should challenge parents and church leaders to take increased interest in and responsibility for the Christian formation of the young. Not only must the central role of parents in this process be understood and named, but the church must also equip parents and other caregivers for this task. The church must provide parents and caregivers with encouragement and realistic assistance in the Christian formation process with the young. Practical and formative approaches to Scripture are essential to this process and must be taught to parents and caregivers in order to equip them for their God-given responsibility. Teachers in the church must also be taught these methods in order to help children (from a very early age) gain a deep love for God’s Word and understand its formative nature.

Perhaps John Wesley has provided us some direction in this. Through his formative approach to Scripture and his methodologies in Bible reading and religious education, we can gain insight into how we might teach children and teens that the Bible is much more than a textbook. God is not a side-item to be ordered through the drive-thru. Instead, God desires our love (heart, soul, mind, and strength) and asks us to love others in the same way. He longs for us to know him intimately through his Word and to allow this Word to engage and transform us.

ENDNOTES
3 Ibid., 21-23.
5 Ibid., 29-30.
6 Ibid., 24, 29.
7 M. Robert Mulholland Jr., Invitation to a Journey: A
This usage of Mulholland's distinction between formational and informational reading is not intended to embrace or to commend every aspect of Mulholland's work; it is simply to recognize that this particular distinction is helpful and applicable to John Wesley's usage of Scripture with children.

Ibid.

Ibid., 111-12.


Wesley, Minutes of Several Conversations Between Wesley and Others, Works, 8:355-56.


Ibid., Minutes of Several Conversations Between Wesley and Others, Works, 8:355-56.

Wesley, Minutes of Several Conversations Between Wesley and Others, Works, 8:355-56.


Ibid.

Psalm 119:97, See also 119:15, 23, 27, 48, 78, 99, 148.

Psalm 119:99.

Maddock, 32.


Ibid., 125.

Maddock, 16-17.

Mulholland, Shaped, 126.

Ibid., 127.

Matthew 7:24-27; James 1:22-25.

Maddock, 22.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Mulholland, Shaped, 129.


Maddock, 14.

Ibid., 15.


Mulholland, Shaped, 131.


Wesley, Sermons on Several Occasions, Preface, Works, 5:62.

Ibid., Emphasis mine.

Wesley, Survey of the Wisdom of God, Preface, Works, 14:413.


Ibid.

Works, 2:100-12.


Ibid., 567-68 (emphasis mine).

Felton, “John Wesley and the Teaching Ministry,” 95.


Works, 13:566.

Prince, 99.

“A distinctive mark of Intertestamental Judaism was
that the law, Torah, was the center of daily life. It regulated the living of each day, not just special occasions. At the most basic level, no food was eaten without the pronunciation of a blessing. The Shema and other prayers were recited before the household started the affairs of the day and at other times. There were several different tithes: of produce, of land, of dough or bread, and of money. Tassels worn on the fringes of cloaks, Scripture portions affixed to the right-hand doorpost of homes and buildings (mezuzahs), phylacteries (or tefillin) that bound the words of the law to head and arm all served as constant reminders of God, his law, and the obligation to obey.” J. Julius Scott, Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 251-52.

58 Ibid., 279.
59 Deut. 6:5.
61 Ibid.
63 Wilson, Our Father Abraham, 216.
64 Deut 6:7, NIV, emphasis mine.
65 Wilson, 216.