

John Wesley: Evangelism with Children in Mind

Mark Gil A. Petallar

When Christians talk about evangelism, people often assume we mean evangelism of, with, and to adults—with adults as both the object and subject of our evangelistic endeavors. Consequently, we preach the gospel of salvation to the lost with adults in mind, and we mobilize Christian adults as participants in our evangelistic endeavor to reach out to the spiritually lost. But are children not both an object and subject of evangelistic endeavors as well? In other words, does our Wesleyan heritage allow us to embrace children as both in need of our evangelism endeavor and participants in that same evangelistic enterprise?¹

Several scholars have sounded the alarm regarding children and their significant role in the kingdom of God. Wess Stafford, former president of Compassion International, said, “The Christian evangelical movement is one of the few that has allowed children to remain a second-rate mandate—the Great Omission in the Great Commission.”² The omission of children in the great commission was recognized by Dr. Gustavo Crocker, one of the General Superintendents of the Nazarene Church and my former professor at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. Crocker recognized the absence of children in the modern missionary movement’s obedience to the great commission despite the active role of children in biblical times.³ Therefore, he calls for the recovery of the active participation of children in the mission work of God. Bambang Budjihanto recognized that an adult schema plays a role in this omission.⁴ He said, “In the schema regarding missions, children are not only left out of the picture, but they often pay

the price when adults take part in mission.”⁵ These voices call for reflection regarding the perspective of the Wesleyan tradition concerning the evangelism of, with, and to children. Thus, my goal today is to extend our horizon of evangelism to include in our evangelism schema the children in our midst. I hope to persuade you using evidence from Scripture and the writings of John Wesley. By doing so, it is my desire to see revival spring up not only with the adults but also with children in our various churches.

THE SCRIPTURE

I want to use today the text in Luke 18:15–17 as our source for biblical reflection. This passage says, “People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (NIV).⁶

This text is **critical** for us because Jesus **taught his disciples about the kingdom of God directly through this encounter**. He used the disciples’ preventive actions as a point of reference to teach them about the kingdom.

In this text, we can observe various characters: the people, the babies, Jesus, and the disciples.⁷ The people had the noble intention of bringing children to Jesus so he could place his hands on them. But the disciples rebuked the people and stopped the children from coming. However, Jesus overrode the authority of the disciples and welcomed the children. In verse 17, Jesus used this opportunity to teach the adults about the kingdom of God—an insight Jesus hoped the disciples would learn from their actions.

These observations were clarified by Peter Spitaler

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Order of the Flame Conference on October 12, 2023, in Pampanga, Philippines upon the invitation of Dr. Luther Oconer to speak during the devotional time.

2. Wess Stafford, foreword to *The 4/14 Window: Raising up a New Generation to Transform the World*, by Luis Bush, (Colorado Springs, CO: Compassion International, 2009), 12.

3. Gustavo Crocker, “Towards a New Missiology: Renewing Our Engagement in God’s Mission,” in *Children and Youth as Partners in Mission: A Compendium of Papers Presented at the 4/14 Window Missiology Conference Seoul, Korea, February 2013*, ed. Dan Brewster and John Baxter Brown (Malaysia: Compassion International, 2013), 79.

4. According to Budjihanto, Schema is a mental framework that allows one to take shortcuts in processing new information and retrieving our memories. However, these mental frameworks can also cause us to exclude pertinent information and focus only on those things that confirm our pre-existing beliefs and group boundaries (prejudice). Moreover, schemas can produce selective perception (bias) and an underestimation of differences within groups/ideas. Bambang Budjihanto, “Children and Youth as Partners in Missions,” in *Children and Youth as Partners in Mission: A Compendium of Papers Presented at the 4/14 Window Missiology Conference Seoul, Korea, February 2013*, ed. Dan Brewster and John Baxter Brown (Malaysia: Compassion International, 2013), 32.

5. Budjihanto, “Children and Youth as Partners in Missions,” 33. He said, “Our schema has significantly influenced how discipleship, mission and the Great Commission are defined and have unintentionally left children out of the picture. The terms mission, missions and missionary are defined for us (adults) as full members of the society and are often associated with: the crossing of cultural and linguistic barriers, a relocation away from a person’s familiar surroundings, and proclaiming the Gospel and making disciples.” Budjihanto, “Children and Youth as Partners in Missions,” 33.

6. Regarding Luke 18:15–17 and parallels, Clark understood that “the texts do not suggest that we act like children but like Jesus . . . [and] that the apostles are not acting as their master would.” Ronald R. Clark Jr., “Kingdoms, Kids, and Kindness: A New Context for Luke 18:15–17,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 5, no. 2 (2002): 240. He further said, “The act of receiving the children was a metaphor of receiving Jesus and the Kingdom of God, which the disciples failed to learn and imitate.” Clark, “Kingdoms, Kids, and Kindness,” 239.

7. Other translations use the word infants, little children, small children, tiny babies, young children, or babes.

who captured the spatial tension brewing in this story. Although his study focuses on the book of Mark, the concept is also found in Luke's account.⁸ Recognizing a tension between indoor and outdoor spaces, Spitaler said,

*"The people challenged spatial boundaries (they request access to the in-door space), the disciples act as gate keepers (they deny access to the in-door space), the children transcend space (they move from out-of-door space to in-door space) and Jesus controls both spaces."*⁹

This tension serves as imagery for Spitaler to emphasize that the disciples' action of not welcoming children was illustrative of not welcoming God's kingdom.¹⁰ Ronald Clark supports this view regarding the disciples' actions. He said, "The disciples failed to follow the earlier teachings [of Luke 9:46–48 about who is the greatest in the kingdom] and were again shown that Jesus receives children."¹¹ Luke emphasizes the importance of welcoming children—a missing piece in the disciples' schema regarding the concept of the Kingdom of God.

To better understand the dynamics of this passage, let us first consider the people bringing their babies for Jesus for blessing. According to Frederick Louis Godet, "Luke would indicate that the consideration enjoyed by Jesus had reached its height. Mothers brought him even their nurslings."¹² Odd Magne Bakke raised several issues regarding the state of children in the ancient world. He notes the high rate of child mortality caused by poor hygiene and sanitary conditions; concerns regarding inheritance, parental support, and care in old age; and anxieties about the future in this life and after death.¹³ From this perspective, children and their situation were a primary concern for people in Jesus's time. However, it is worth observing that the discussion of children in our text focuses primarily on the concerns of adults. Rosalind Tan, on the other hand, emphasizes that bringing children to elders and scribes for prayers and blessings was a customary practice in Jewish culture, especially before the Day of Atonement.¹⁴ Yet, the disciples did not adhere to this practice on this occasion.

The disciples' actions are important subject for us today as we wrestle with the significance of children in our evangelistic endeavors. To further illuminate

8. Cf. Mark Gil A. Petallar, "An Understanding of Children as Mission from Mark 10:13–16," *Journal of Asian Mission* 18, no. 2 (2017): 71–83.

9. Peter Spitaler, "Welcoming a Child as a Metaphor for Welcoming God's Kingdom: A Close Reading of Mark 10:13–16," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31, no. 4 (2009): 430.

10. Spitaler, "Welcoming God's Kingdom," 432.

11. Clark, "Kingdoms, Kids, and Kindness," 239.

12. Frederick Louis Godet, *Godet Commentary on Luke, John, Romans, and 1 Corinthians*, trans. E. W. Shalders, n.d. Available at Accordance Bible Software.

13. Odd Magne Bakke, *When Children Become People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 23–25.

14. Rosalind Tan, "Welcoming Children," *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 11, no. 1 (2023): 22.

their actions, we must delve deeper into the view of children in the ancient world. The perspectives of several scholars can assist us here. David Csinos said children were seen as a "sub-form of humanity lacking in reason, status, and formation."¹⁵ Ronald Clark argued that the attitudes towards children in the Ancient Near East were reflected in the apostles' attitudes that children were: (a) not worth an adult's time, (b) not considered full members of the community until they were twenty years old, (c) not viewed as mature citizens of the community and classed with slaves, women, and imbeciles despite having been taught the Scriptures, and (d) without rights.¹⁶ Judith Gundry-Volf noted that children were considered to be "mentally deficient and ignorant; they spoke nonsense and failed to think and plan rationally; they were capricious, foolish, and quarrelsome. In a word, they lacked the prime Roman virtue of reason and could not participate in the rational world of the Roman citizens."¹⁷ Thomas Wiedemann also shared some of the negative views, noting that children were viewed as "physically and mentally weak" because of their susceptibility to illness which resulted in the high mortality rate. Furthermore, they were depreciated as non-combatant citizens in an era of war where men were needed to fight.¹⁸ Samjung Kang-Hamilton added that children were the "least powerful people socially, politically, and economically."¹⁹ All these descriptions underscore how children were viewed as unimportant, unwelcomed, and insignificant in adult affairs, explaining the action of the disciples in stopping the children from coming to Jesus.

Essentially, in a male-dominated society where children were viewed as a lower class, the disciples used their authority to limit their access of children to Jesus. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown explained that the disciples saw the intrusion as useless because infants were incapable of receiving anything from him since his ministrations were for grown-ups.²⁰ Jesus was an important figure (Great Rabbi) whose precious time

15. David Csinos, "The Biblical Theme of Welcoming Children," *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 8 (2007): 105.

16. Clark, "Kingdoms, Kids, and Kindness," 240–244.

17. Judith M. Gundry-Volf, "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 32. This idea was shared by Thomas Wiedemann who described children as "a symbol of non-participation in the rational world of the adult due to its inability to communicate." Thomas Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 17–18. This would mean that children could not participate in rational discourses and disputes. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire*, 27.

18. Wiedemann, *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire*, 17. Wiedemann also described in his work that children were associated with women in war because they were overcome with fear or were simply fearful people.

19. Samjung Kang-Hamilton, "Welcoming Children and Receiving Jesus: Reflections on the Synoptic Gospels," *Restoration Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2018): 29.

20. Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's Commentary Critical and Explanatory of the Whole Bible*, n.d. Available at Accordance Bible Software.

was limited. They desired to make use of that time for the intellectual, physical, and spiritual needs of the adults. The apostles, thinking from an adult point of view, did not see any need for children to interrupt Jesus or consume the adults' time.²¹ However, this provided a great opportunity for Jesus to inform, correct, and teach those whose understanding would otherwise "exclude children and their concerns" about the kingdom of God.²² By doing so, Jesus hoped to change the worldview of the disciples regarding children in the kingdom.

The action of Jesus in this story is an essential key when we as adults engage in evangelistic endeavors with children in mind. Jesus' action was geared toward teaching lessons to adults. Csinos identified three great reversals in Jesus's teaching that ran counter to the norms and expectations of His day:

- (a) Jesus engaged children as teaching assistants to educate the disciples,
- (b) Jesus affirmed the inherent worth of children as his disciples and representatives,
- (c) Jesus insisted the disciples must welcome those who represent him—not only high-status individuals, but also those who held the lowest status, children.²³

Kang-Hamilton explained that Jesus's action of receiving and acknowledging children would have seemed indefensible to the disciples who played games of power and status for selfish purposes and were even inclined to neglect the vulnerable.²⁴

Luke 18:15–17 allows us to see how children were an integral part of the business of the kingdom of God. As a result of the adults' actions of hindering children from coming to Jesus, he overruled the authority of the disciples. The children were viewed as important, as valued, and as worthy of Jesus's time. The text clarifies the disciples' misunderstanding regarding the Kingdom of God of the disciples regarding the kingdom of God and teachings of Jesus, as well as the prevailing cultural male and adult bias, that led to hinder the children in coming to Jesus. This teaching of Jesus sheds light on our contemporary approach in reaching out to children and ensuring we do not prevent them from becoming active participants in God's Kingdom.

JOHN WESLEY'S CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE OF EVANGELISM

Let us now turn our attention to John Wesley and the concept of evangelism with children in mind. It is fitting for us to consider Wesley's perspective on evangelism to, of, and with children as members of the Wesleyan tradition, for whom Wesley continues to serve as a revered figure. The following section explore Wesley's perspective by examining his

childhood experience, his works regarding children, and his interactions with children during his ministry. This survey will serve as a foundational reference for evangelism of, to, and with children.

John Wesley was raised by his parents with the evangelism of children in mind. The rectory fire was a key event that significantly shaped Susanna Wesley's concern for the souls of her children. She recorded in her journal the miraculous escape of John from the rectory fire. During the fire, John was trapped in the burning house, and his father Samuel had already given up hope of saving him. In her letter to Sammy dated February 14, 1708/9, Susanna wrote that Samuel Sr. thought of John as "lost, and commended his soul to God."²⁵ However, Wesley was saved through a window with the help of the neighbors who formed a human ladder to reach him.²⁶ This event was significant for the family and most especially for his mother, and eventually for Wesley himself. His mother made it her deliberate effort to care for the souls of her children, particularly of Wesley's. In her meditation dated May 17, 1711, Susanna wrote, "I do intend to be more particularly careful of the soul of this child . . . that I may do my endeavor to instill into his mind the principles of thy true religion and virtue."²⁷ She intentionally spent time raising her children, nurturing their faith through prayer, one-on-one time alone with each child, and structured lessons.²⁸ She became even more committed to nurturing the children's faith when she saw the counterproductive result of her prior efforts as they acquired worldly habits following their dispersal after the fire.²⁹ She even established a house church and defended it against any objection from her often absent husband. She took the care of the children's souls seriously and viewing their spiritual well-being as talents committed to her care for which she would

25. Susanna Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, ed. Charles Jr. Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 65.

26. Terrell E. Johnson, "A History of Methodist Education and Its Influence on American Public Education" (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1989), 22. Terrell detailed how a neighbor brilliantly thought of forming a human ladder in the absence of a physical one.

27. Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 235. George Stevenson also claimed that John Wesley's escape from the rectory fire "induced his mother to pay special attention to this mental and religious training." George J. Stevenson, *Memorials of the Wesley Family: Including Biographical and Historical Sketches of All the Members of the Family for Two Hundred and Fifty Years; Together with a Genealogical Table of the Wesley, with Historical Notes, for More than Nine Hundred Years* (London: Paternoster Row, n.d.), 330.

28. John Wesley's schedule for time alone with his mother was every Thursday night. Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 80.

29. Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 372. It is in this work of Susanna that she gave an account of the dispersion of her children and how her trainings at home prior to the rectory fire was lost, how her children acquired bad habits, and how she endeavored to intentionally reverse the bad influences.

21. Cf. Petallar, "An Understanding of Children," 71–82.

22. Kang-Hamilton, "Receiving Jesus," 34.

23. Csinos, "Biblical Theme," 106.

24. Kang-Hamilton, "Receiving Jesus," 36.

be accountable to God.³⁰ In one letter to Samuel Jr., she expressed her deep concern for her children's eternal happiness.³¹

John Wesley, for his part, recognized his miraculous escape during his ordeal in the rectory fire. In his journal dated February 9, 1750, he wrote, "About eleven o'clock it came into my mind that this was the very day and hour, in which forty years ago, I was taken out of the flames. I stopped and gave a short account of that wonderful providence."³² Not only did Wesley remember the event, but he also wished to be commemorated by it. He suggested that on his grave it should be written, "Here lieth the Body of John Wesley, a brand plucked out of the burning."³³ Thus for Wesley, that miraculous escape was a life-transforming event. Wesley's awareness of God's hand at work in his life through the rectory fire event, the intentional faith nurture of his mother because of the fire, and the counterproductive influence of others during their dispersion shaped Wesley's perspective on the evangelism with children.

WESLEY'S WORKS ON THE EVANGELISM OF CHILDREN

As evident in his many writings, John Wesley endeavored to evangelize children. These works include sermons, journal entries, letters, conference minutes, and materials specifically for children: such as instructions for children, prayers for children, and even hymns for children. In these diverse works, Wesley gave several reasons for reaching out to children and addressed adults' responsibilities towards children's spirituality. These writings will serve as evidence of Wesley's great concern towards the souls of children.

In his sermons, Wesley emphasized the profound responsibilities of parents to care for the souls of their children. He recognized that children are "immortal spirits" entrusted to parents.³⁴ Based on this understanding, Wesley underscored the future accountability of parents towards God.³⁵ Moreover, in

a letter to Ms. Hetty, he expressed a view of children as "glorious monuments of divine grace."³⁶ From such evidence, we can see that Wesley emphasized the great value of children whom adults should not dismiss because they will be held accountable to God.

In addition to holding a high regard for their value, in his sermon *On the Education of Children*, Wesley recognized the need to evangelize children due to the various spiritual diseases that affect them. Wesley noted that children were born with "atheism, pride, loved of the world, anger, deviation from truth, [proneness] to speak or act contrary to justice."³⁷ For example, on the issue of atheism alone, Wesley recognized the need to evangelize children because he believed children possess "no knowledge of God at all, no fear of God at all, neither is God in all [their] thoughts. Whatever change may afterwards be wrought, (whether by the grace of God or by [the child's] own reflection, or by education), [the child] is, by nature, a mere atheist."³⁸ Theologically, Wesley recognized the effect of original sin even in children. Thus, this condition warrants great concern from adults to evangelize children.

Wesley's sermon *On Family Religion* provides further evidence of his concern for the souls of children. In this sermon, Wesley again reminded his hearers of the spiritual diseases of children. But at the same time, he reminded and cautioned them about the various possible counterproductive influences in schools and harmful adult practice towards their children.³⁹ These critiques of the influences that might feed children's spiritual diseases show how Wesley continually kept in mind the souls of children. His concerns extending even to their work and marital life, demonstrates his holistic engagement with children. This evidence reveals how Wesley maintained his care for the souls of children and their future.

However, it is important to recognize that Wesley did not focus solely on the spiritual diseases of children as his driving motivation toward evangelizing them. His primary motivation was God's ability to heal those spiritual diseases. He said that God is the great "physician of the soul."⁴⁰ By this, Wesley meant that only God has the ability to heal these spiritual diseases. When teaching children, he also recognized the active work of the Holy Spirit in enlightening them to understand spiritual things. Wesley said, "Whenever the Holy Spirit teaches, there

30. Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 79. Susanna provided two reasons why she organized these Sunday evening prayer meetings: (a) it was the church's strict observance of the Lord's day which was not limited by going to church and (b) she viewed the service at night as an acceptable act to God in spending the sabbath. Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 79–80. Attendance at Susanna's Sunday evening worship service had really grown starting from her family, then with neighbors grew to twenty or twenty-five people, and then had become between two and three hundred. Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 82.

31. Wesley, *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, 72.

32. John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, Standard., vol. 3 (London: The Epworth Press, 1938), 453–454.

33. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 309. This journal entry was dated November 26, 1753.

34. John Wesley, "On Family Religion," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, *Sermons III 71-114*, ed. Albert C. Outler. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 337. As discussed above, this view was evident in his mother's influence from his childhood.

35. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 3, ed. Outler, 337.

36. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vol. 13 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 83.

37. John Wesley, "On the Education of Children," in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 3, *Sermons III 71-114*, ed. Albert C. Outler. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 350–352.

38. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 3, ed. Outler, 350.

39. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 3, ed. Outler, 342–345. In this sermon Wesley continued to remind the parents of their responsibilities for the souls of their children not only in the home but especially the influences outside the homes. He regarded their responsibilities which included even in the area of choosing dress, schools, masters, professions, and marriage.

40. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 3, ed. Outler, 349.

is no delay in learning.”⁴¹ Thus, evangelizing children is made possible by the active involvement of God. However, the initiative of God does not disregard the role of adults. Wesley said, “[God] honors men to be, in this sense, workers together with him. By this means the reward is ours, while the glory redounds to him.”⁴²

John Wesley’s *Treatise on Baptism* offers another perspective related to the topic of the evangelism of children. In response to objections people had raised against including children in evangelistic endeavors, Wesley gave several grounds for infant baptism. These were:

- (1) infants need to be washed from original sin;
- (2) infants were capable of entering a covenant and both were and still are under the evangelical covenant;
- (3) infants are capable of coming to Christ, of admission into the Church, and of solemn dedication to God;
- (4) the apostles baptized infants; and
- (5) baptizing infants has been the general practice of the Church, in all places and in all ages.⁴³

These beliefs of Wesley prove that children were not to be hindered from coming to faith, to Christ, and even to admission into the Church. Wesley was not deterred by the inability of children to repent as basis for baptism. Thus, it can be safely argued that Wesley thought deeply about children and the salvation of their souls, and their entrance to the church to become covenant participants and members of the body of Christ was constantly on Wesley’s mind. Wesley even emphasized that godparents were to make sure children were taught in sermons and through the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. Godparents were responsible to bring children to church and encourage them to take sacraments—all with the goal that they would live a godly Christian life.⁴⁴ These again are evidence of Wesley’s great concern for the salvation and nurture of the faith of children.

Moreover, Wesley extended the responsibility to care for the salvation and faith nurture of children to the Methodist ministers and other children’s workers. He recognized the strategic importance of the family and children in the growth and sustainability of the Methodist movement.⁴⁵ He even confronted Methodist preachers who shied away from the responsibility of

caring for children by claiming their lack of spiritual gifts. Wesley responded, “Gift or no gift, you are to do it, else you are not called a Methodist preacher.”⁴⁶ Wesley’s argument revealed his great emphasis on caring for the souls of children. It can be safely argued that Wesley regarded the evangelism of children was a non-negotiable task for ministers. The same is also true for those who worked with children in a lay capacity. In his writing to Ms. Bishop dated to May 17, 1781, Wesley said, “Make Christians, my dear, make Christians.”⁴⁷ All these works of Wesley consistently reveal his great concerns for the souls of children and serve as proof that children were included in Wesley’s approach to ministry. The frequent mention of children in his works reveals the weight of his concern for them.

Wesley confronted Methodist preachers who shied away from caring for children, responding, “Gift or no gift, you are to do it, else you are not called a Methodist preacher.” Wesley’s argument revealed his great emphasis on caring for the souls of children. This was a non-negotiable task for ministers.

JOHN WESLEY’S PERSONAL ENCOUNTER AND EVANGELISM OF CHILDREN

John Wesley saw the work of God in the lives of children. He observed children listening and responding to the gospel just like adults did. On the ship during his travel to Georgia, he witnessed Mr. Ingram instructing children.⁴⁸ In his journal entry dated February 3, 1738, Wesley recorded his early experience with children in Georgia. He reported, “Many children have learned how they ought to serve God, and to be useful to their neighbor, and those whom it most concerns have an opportunity of knowing the true state of their infant colony and laying a firmer foundation of peace and happiness for many generations.”⁴⁹ In Savannah, Wesley recorded an account of the methods ministers used when they ministered to children. Here he recorded that the

41. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 3, ed. Outler, 341. In Wesley’s sermon *The Unity of the Divine Being*, Wesley was asked that these religious instructions were impossible to children because their understanding was limited. However, Wesley answered that it was God who really opens up the understanding of humanity whether they were adults or children. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Albert Outler, vol. 4, *Sermons IV* 115-151 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 64.

42. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 3, ed. Outler, 349.

43. John Wesley, “Treatise on Baptism,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vol. 10 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 193–197.

44. John Wesley, “Serious Thoughts Concerning God Fathers and Godmothers,” in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vol. 10 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 508.

45. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 3, ed. Outler, 335.

46. *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, from the First, Held in London by the Late Rev. John Wesley, A.M. in the Year 1744*, vol. 1 (London: John Mason, 1862), 69.

47. Wesley, *Wesley’s Letters*, 13:37.

48. John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vol. 1 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 18. Wesley also heard testimony of Mr. Oglethorpe of him teaching children (Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1:24).

49. John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, Standard., vol. 1 (London: Robert Culley, nd), 435.

catechism was taught to the youngest children before morning class and the older children in the evening.⁵⁰

From his time in Kingswood and other ministries, Wesley recorded observations of the spiritual experiences of children. He said, "And almost as soon as we began, God gave us a token for good; four children receiving a clear sense of pardon."⁵¹ He also recorded in his journal dated October 2, 1784, that many children had been moved by the moving of the Holy Spirit.⁵² He witnessed and heard about the transformation of children's lives because of the gospel. He stated in his journal dated July 16, 1783, "Men, women, and children flocked out of their houses and kneeled down together in the streets."⁵³ This occurred during a storm. For Wesley, these episodes proved the receptivity of children to spiritual things. It also signaled that evangelism should not be limited to adults but should rather include children.

For Wesley, these episodes proved the receptivity of children to spiritual things. It also signaled that evangelism should not be limited to adults but should rather include children. He witnessed and heard about the transformation of children's lives because of the gospel. John Wesley himself personally evangelized children and ministered to children.

John Wesley himself personally evangelized children and ministered to children. In his preaching, children were also present. In his journal dated April 5, 1782, Wesley said, "I preached at Oldham and was surprised to see the street lined with little children . . . before preaching they only ran round me and before me; but after it, a whole troop, boys and girls, closed me in and would not be content till I shook

50. Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 1:45. Wesley used the term, lowest class, which I understand to mean small children. Wesley later recognized how his time in Savannah influenced him, as referenced in his work entitled *The People Called Methodists*. He said, "These were the first rudiments of the Methodist societies" (Wesley, *Wesley's Letters*, 13:306).

51. Wesley, *Wesley's Letters*, 13:301. He also witnessed children's spirituality after the preaching of Mr. Berridge. He testified, "Afterwards at church many cried out, especially children, whose agonies were amazing. One of the oldest, a girl ten or twelve years old, was in violent contortions of body, and wept aloud, I think incessantly, during the whole service; and several much younger children were agonizing as this did. . . but some women, and several children, felt the power of the same almighty Spirit." Wesley, *Wesley's Letters*, 13:345.

52. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 23, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, 23:333.

53. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 23, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, 23:285.

each of them by the hand."⁵⁴ On July 1, 1782, Wesley recorded that he spent time with forty poor children whom Lay Maxwell kept at school where they also learned principles of religion.⁵⁵ He also followed up on children after ministry. In his journal, he recorded, "The number of children that are clearly converted to God is particularly remarkable. Thirteen or fourteen little maidens in one class are rejoicing in God their savior, and are as serious and stayed in their whole behavior as if they were thirty or forty years old."⁵⁶

In addition to evangelizing them personally, Wesley developed materials called *Instructions for Children* and *Prayers for Children*.⁵⁷ Even without a child himself, Wesley extended his pastoral ministry to them. He provided lessons to equip his ministers for teaching and nurturing the faith of children.⁵⁸ His work on *Prayers for Children* supported and supplemented his endeavors in the care of the souls of children.⁵⁹ These added to the evidence of Wesley's great concern for the souls of children.

EVANGELISM WITH CHILDREN IN WESLEY'S PERSPECTIVE

John Wesley's works so far have not revealed any actual commissioning of children for evangelism purposes. However, several scholars talked about the possibility of children as subjects for evangelistic endeavors. Dean Blevins and Peter Benzie have shed insights on this topic from a theological perspective. Blevins on his part focused on the idea of children as means of grace. He said,

*Wesley intended the inclusion of these children's lives as part of the narrative of the people called Methodist, not only as a form of historical reporting, but also as a means of grace for those who would read their accounts. Wesley believed that children's spiritual lives provided a valuable witness for the Kingdom of God.*⁶⁰

This meant that Wesley's personal experience of the spirituality of children in his ministries as discussed above served as a means of grace for the transformation of the schema of Wesley regarding the kingdom of God. The same transformation of schema was implied by Blevins to other Methodist workers who read the spiritual experiences of children as

54. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 23, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, 23:235.

55. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 23, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, 23:241.

56. Wesley, *The Works of Wesley*, vol 23, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, 23:349.

57. The writer recognized the existence of *Hymns for Children* but has not yet read the material.

58. See John Wesley, *Instructions for Children*, 2nd ed., 1745, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=emu.000015257578&view=1up&seq=2>.

59. John Wesley, "Prayers for Children," in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vol. 11 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 259–272.

60. Dean Gray Blevins, "To Be a Means of Grace: A Wesleyan Perspective on Christian Practices and the Lives of Children," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (2018): 67.

reported by Wesley. Wesley's personal witness to the spiritual journey of children opened his mind to the work of God in the lives of children and to how receptive children are to the working of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the testimonies of children were a means of grace for Wesley. Peter Benzie concurs. Benzie emphasizes the idea of the sovereignty of God and says that adults should not "place limits on God" because "God can and does move in the hearts and minds of whomever he chooses at whatever age he chooses."⁶¹

Blevins and Benzie are correct. As recorded in biblical literature, children can serve as agents of God to open the minds of adults. The account of the disciples' hindering the children and Jesus welcoming them is one example of how God uses children to teach adults. Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace accommodates the reality of God working in the lives of children and at the same time God using children to minister to adults. For Catherine Stonehouse, this doctrine makes ministry to children child-friendly.⁶² For Charles Rishell, the doctrine makes children's ministry optimistic.⁶³ Just like the idea of Benzie, we cannot stop God from accomplishing his purposes his way. The reality of the testimonies of children in Wesley's accounts proved that children were ministered to by God and served as God's agents to open Wesley's mind regarding the Kingdom of God.

CONCLUSION

From a Wesleyan point of view, evangelism should include children. Any evangelistic endeavors among Wesleyan denominations should keep children in mind. When it comes to spirituality, children are receptive. As evidenced by their spiritual diseases, children are affected by original sin. They indeed need to hear and be transformed by the gospel. They need to be aware of sinful tendencies that result from spiritual diseases. The work of God towards the salvation of humankind also includes work in the lives of the children. John Wesley's childhood evangelistic experience at home, his several works on children, his personal experiences with children on evangelism, and his testimonies and observations on evangelism with children provide evidence for how children were indeed part of Wesley's ministry. He did not exclude them. Just like adults, he saw them both as subjects

and recipients in the evangelistic endeavors.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakke, Odd Magne. *When Children Become People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*. Translated by Brian McNeil. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005.
- Benzie, Peter. "As a Little Child: Children in the Theology of John Wesley." Master's thesis, Laidlaw-Carey Graduate School, 2020.
- Blevins, Dean Gray. "To Be a Means of Grace: A Wesleyan Perspective on Christian Practices and the Lives of Children." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (2018): 47–67.
- Budjihanto, Bambang. "Children and Youth as Partners in Missions." In *Children and Youth as Partners in Mission: A Compendium of Papers Presented at the 4/14 Window Missiology Conference Seoul, Korea, February 2013*, edited by Dan Brewster and John Baxter Brown. Malaysia: Compassion International, 2013.
- Bush, Luis. *The 4/14 Window: Raising up a New Generation to Transform the World*. Colorado Springs, CO: Compassion International, 2009.
- Clark, Ronald R, Jr. "Kingdoms, Kids, and Kindness: A New Context for Luke 18:15-17." *Stone-Campbell Journal* 5, no. 2 (2002): 235–248.
- Crocker, Gustavo. "Towards a New Missiology: Renewing Our Engagement in God's Mission." In *Children and Youth as Partners in Mission: A Compendium of Papers Presented at the 4/14 Window Missiology Conference Seoul, Korea, February 2013*, edited by Dan Brewster and John Baxter Brown. Malaysia: Compassion International, 2013.
- Csinos, David. "The Biblical Theme of Welcoming Children." *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* 8 (2007): 97–117.
- Godet, Frederick Louis. *Godet Commentary on Luke, John, Romans, and 1 Corinthians*. Translated by E. W. Shalders, n.d.
- Gundry-Volf, Judith M. "The Least and the Greatest: Children in the New Testament." In *The Child in Christian Thought*, edited by Marcia J. Bunge. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001.
- Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown. *Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's Commentary Critical and Explanatory of the Whole Bible*, n.d.
- Johnson, Terrell E. "A History of Methodist Education and Its Influence on American Public Education." PhD diss., Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1989.

61. Peter Benzie, "As a Little Child: Children in the Theology of John Wesley" (master's thesis, Laidlaw-Carey Graduate School, 2020), 144.

62. Catherine Stonehouse, "Children in Wesleyan Thought," in *Children's Spirituality*, ed. Kevin E. Lawson and Scottie May, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 128. She also explained how this grace made it possible for children to respond to God's seeking love. Catherine Stonehouse, "Children in Wesleyan Thought," in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004), 130.

63. Rishell said, "By nature children of wrath, by grace children of God, and the latter was stronger than the former." Charles W. Rishell, "Wesley and Other Methodist Fathers on Childhood Religion," *Methodist Review* 18, no. 5 (October 1902): 781. Both the scholarship of Stonehouse and Rishell helped untrained eyes see the hidden gem in Wesley's ministry of and with children.

- Kang-Hamilton, Samjung. "Welcoming Children and Receiving Jesus: Reflections on the Synoptic Gospels." *Restoration Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2018): 29–40.
- Rishell, Charles W. "Wesley and Other Methodist Fathers on Childhood Religion." *Methodist Review* 18, no. 5 (October 1902): 778–784.
- Spitaler, Peter. "Welcoming a Child as a Metaphor for Welcoming God's Kingdom: A Close Reading of Mark 10:13-16." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31, no. 4 (2009): 423–446.
- Stevenson, George J. *Memorials of the Wesley Family: Including Biographical and Historical Sketches of All the Members of the Family for Two Hundred and Fifty Years; Together with a Genealogical Table of the Wesley, with Historical Notes, for More than Nine Hundred Years*. London: Paternoster Row, n.d.
- Stonehouse, Catherine. "Children in Wesleyan Thought." In *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research, and Applications*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2004.
- — —. "Children in Wesleyan Thought." In *Children's Spirituality*, edited by Kevin E. Lawson and Scottie May. 2nd ed. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019.
- Tan, Rosalind. "Welcoming Children." *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 11, no. 1 (2023): 20–23.
- Wesley, John. *Instructions for Children*. 2nd ed., 1745. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=emu.000015257578&view=1up&seq=2>.
- — —. "On Family Religion." In *The Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 3. *Sermons III* 71–114, ed. Albert C. Outler. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986.
- — —. "On the Education of Children." In *The Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 3. *Sermons III* 71–114, ed. Albert C. Outler. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986.
- — —. "Prayers for Children." In *The Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 11. 3rd ed. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979.
- — —. "Serious Thoughts Concerning God Fathers and Godmothers." In *The Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 10. 3rd ed. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979.
- — —. *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*. Edited by Nehemiah Curnock. Standard. Vol. 1. London: Robert Culley, nd.
- — —. *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M. Sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford*. Edited by Nehemiah Curnock. Standard. Vol. 3. London: The Epworth Press, 1938.
- — —. *The Works of John Wesley*. 3rd ed. Vol. 2. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979.
- — —. *The Works of John Wesley*. 3rd ed. Vol. 13. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979.
- — —. *The Works of John Wesley*. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979.
- — —. *The Works of John Wesley*. Edited by Albert Outler. Vol. 4. *Sermons IV* 115–151. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987.
- — —. *The Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 23. *Journal and Diaries VI*, ed. Reginald W. Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995.
- — —. "Treatise on Baptism." In *The Works of John Wesley*. Vol. 10. 3rd ed. Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979.
- Wesley, Susanna. *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*. Edited by Charles Jr. Wallace. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Wiedemann, Thomas. *Adults and Children in the Roman Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Minutes of the Methodist Conferences, from the First, Held in London by the Late Rev. John Wesley, A.M. in the Year 1744*. Vol. 1. London: John Mason, 1862.



Mark Gil A. Petallar

Rev. Mark Gil A. Petallar (PhD in Holistic Child Development) serves as Senior Pastor of the First Free Methodist Church of Manila and Superintendent of the Northern Philippine Conference of the Free Methodist Church. He also chairs the Study Commission on Doctrine of the Philippine General Conference of the Free Methodist Church.