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Grief, faith and eighteenth-century childhood: the Doddridges of Northampton

Katie Barclay

I have some times said & much oftener thought that Imoderate Grief on the Death of Children was never more unaccountable or utterly Inexcusable in any person than Myself ... When these Dear Little Creatures have been on the verge of the Invisable World how has Faith in it were gone before & as it were presented the willing Sacrifice to their Saviours Arms & when they have pass'd the Confines of Mortality the Contemplation of their Exalted Felicity has fill [sic] my Souls with Joy Unspeakable & Full of Glory This has the Spirit Tryumph'd but soon alas too soon Does the Flesh renew the Conflict ... we feel Dessatisfied & Disappointed a thousand tender circumstances crowd in to the mind we cannot forbear secretly wishing to renew the fond embrace of those once so near objects of our warmest affections. The impossibility initiates the Grief how the Soul cleaveth to the Dust & we goe with Mary to the Grave to weep.¹

This quotation, taken from a much longer letter to her mother and sister, expressed Mary Humphreys' complex emotions at the death of her four-year-old daughter, Charlotte, in 1766. The daughter of a well-known non-conformist minister, Philip Doddridge, Mary had an active faith and in line with the doctrine of her denomination believed that while grief at the death of a loved one was human, Christians should ultimately feel joy in their contemplation

¹ Dr William's Library, London [hereafter DWL], L1/2/204 Mary Humphreys to Mercy and Mercy Doddridge, 16 October 1766. With thanks to the Library for allowing the use of these sources.

of both the deceased's and their own salvation and the wonders that awaited them in the afterlife. For this group, grieving involved a process of moving through feelings of pain and loss towards a feeling of joy. Yet, joy was not always easy to achieve in the face of tragic loss with many, like Mary, finding it a fleeting emotion. For some, this created spiritual anxieties as they attempted to reconcile their feelings of pain with their strong faith in salvation. Sharing their emotional and spiritual struggle with others in writing and taking consolation from friends acted as mechanism to perform and console their grief; the resulting record provides a remarkable historical source that gives access to how this community understood death, particularly child death, and how they in turn educated their children in their grieving rituals. In doing so, it highlights not only how emotional practices – performances of both grief and those of consolation – were shaped by the religious-cultural context in which this group was immersed, but by ideas around appropriate spiritual behaviour for children and adults. This Chapter looks at how the Doddridge family network grieved, beginning with an exploration of the works of Philip Doddridge, the family patriarch but also an influential spiritual writer and pastor.

Responding to child death: faith and grief in early modern Britain

Philip Doddridge (1702-51) was the grandson of two non-conformist ministers, an Anglican who had been ejected from his living for non-conformity and an immigrant Czech Lutheran.²

² This account of Doddridge's life is taken from: Isabel Rivers, 'Doddridge, Philip (1702–1751)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, 2009), accessed 1 December 2014, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7746>. A fuller biography has been written by Malcolm Deacon, *Philip Doddridge of Northampton* (Northampton: Northamptonshire Libraries, 1980).

He was educated in a number of non-conformist schools, but began his training for the ministry under the Presbyterian dissenter, Samuel Clarke. He then attended the academy of the Independent John Jennings, who promoted a very catholic approach to religious belief, taking from various theologies as God inspired him. Doddridge's own belief system was similarly liberal; he rejected a number of pastoral invitations by Presbyterian congregations that he thought were 'too orthodox', and appeared to accept the designation of a 'Moderate Calvinist'. Many of his students became well-known amongst the 'Rational Dissenters', a group that believed that the truths of God could be found through scientific exploration, and Doddridge had leanings in this direction. Ultimately however, he prioritised the importance of faith, and particularly rejected the deist values that rationalism tended towards. Reflecting his historical moment, he was a strong believer in 'Moderatism' that he located in the 'polite' values of his era.³ He tended to view the polish of polite society as a marker of correct Christian conduct and he was desirous that his work spoke to an elite, as well as popular, audience, which led him to downplay enthusiastic emotional rhetoric in his preaching and the more supernatural elements of Christian belief, although he seemed to have greater faith in them in his own private writings.⁴

Like most Presbyterians, Doddridge was a strong Congregationalist; he believed in the importance of 'practical divinity', meaning he held that educating his flock was of greater

³ Politeness was a central value of mid-eighteenth century England and an ideal held by most of the social elite: Lawrence Klein, 'Politeness and the Interpretation of the British Eighteenth Century', *Historical Journal* 5 (2002), 869-98.

⁴ Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England 1660–1780, Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 187-95; Jeremy Schmidt, *Melancholy and the Care of the Soul: Religion, Moral Philosophy and Madness in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 147.

importance than contributing to more esoteric theological debates. He ran one of the most influential dissenting academies for the training of new ministers (mostly teenagers) in England until his death. Doddridge also wrote a number of popular works, providing pragmatic information and advice on spiritual issues. These included the six-volume *Family Expositor*, as well as a book of advice on educating children in the faith, and a popular sermon for parents on how to respond to child death.⁵ In 1730, he married Mercy Maris. They had nine children, of which four survived until adulthood. The death of his firstborn and much beloved daughter Tetsy in 1735 at age five was a major factor in his thinking on child death, inspiring his popular sermon on this topic, rumoured to have been composed over her coffin.

Doddridge did not write in a religious or cultural vacuum. The appropriate emotional and godly response to death had long been a central part of popular culture. Dying a good death, that is one where the dying had time to reflect on their position, prepare spiritually for the afterlife, and to denote their preparedness in their physical appearance through calm acceptance and perhaps even pleasure in what awaited them, was an ideal promoted across Christian dominations in early modern Britain.⁶ Those who remained behind were expected

⁵ *The Family Expositor*, 6 Volumes (Various publishers, 1739–56), for more details see: Tessa Whitehouse, 'The Family Expositor, the Doddridge Circle and the Booksellers', *Library* 11, no. 3 (2010), 321-44; *Sermons on the Religious Education of Children* (1732); *Sermons to Young Persons* (1735); *Submission to Divine Providence in the Death of Children, recommended and enforced in a Sermon* (1737).

⁶ Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and Family in England, 1480-1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Lucinda McCray Beier, 'The Good Death in Seventeenth-Century England', in *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, ed. Ralph Houlbrooke (London: Routledge, 1989), 43-61;

to display grief moderately and take comfort in their eventual meeting with the deceased in the afterlife. As a number of historians have noted, over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there appears to have been a greater place for public responses to bereavement, as stoicism gave way to more elaborate grieving rituals.⁷ This provided a space both for people to openly discuss and express grief and for a variety of consolatory responses to emerge. One of the more important of these in the eighteenth century, reflecting the growing importance of sympathy as a communicative mode, was the idea that those who had similar losses could, through their shared experience, provide particular consolation to each other. Through collectively grieving, the burden of the loss was relieved, enabling the bereaved to moderate emotion and move towards emotional wellbeing.⁸ As in many other contexts, sociability provided the mechanism that allowed people to recognise and perform their duty – in this case, the duties that arose from participating in everyday life.

Richard Wunderli and Gerald Broce, 'The Final Moments before Death in Early Modern England', *Sixteenth-Century Journal* 20, no. 2 (1989), 259-75.

⁷ Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1984); Ralph Houlbrooke, 'Death, Church and the Family in England between the Late Fifteenth and the Early Eighteenth Centuries', in *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, ed. Houlbrooke, 25-42; for their apogee in the nineteenth-century see: Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁸ Stephen Pender, 'Rhetoric, Grief and the Imagination in Early Modern England', *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 43, no. 1 (2010), 54-85; Anna Richards, 'Providence and Sympathy: Consoling the Bereaved in the Late Eighteenth Century', *German Life and Letters* 59, no. 3 (2006), 361-78.

Consoling the bereaved was a common necessity of the eighteenth century, particularly for those who aimed for a pastoral role. From his late teens, Doddridge was called on to comfort his family, friends and later his flock during times of loss. His advice to the suffering is fairly consistent over the course of his lifetime, perhaps reflecting the extent to which his model of consolation arose from a broader set of beliefs held by his denomination. Yet, the popularity of his sermon on child death, as well as his renowned ability as a preacher, suggest that he was particularly successful at conveying these ideas in a manner that captured the imagination of his generation. Doddridge's advice to those who had lost a loved one was not atypical for the period. He firmly believed in the importance of sympathy as a salve for grief. When offering consolation, he almost always sought to provide an example of a similar loss in his own life, which was meant to evidence his sympathetic engagement with the bereaved and give force to the sincerity and utility of his consolatory advice. In the preface to his sermon on child death, for example, he apologises for 'the Tears of a Parent, and those Meltings of Soul which overflow in the following Pages', where he 'selected a few obvious Thoughts which I found peculiarly suitable to myself; and, I bless GOD, I can truly say, they gave me a solid and substantial Relief, under a Shock of Sorrow, which would otherwise have broken my Spirits'.⁹

Having established a shared connection with the bereaved, he cautions against 'excessive sorrow', requesting that they turn away from grief and open themselves to consolation; asking them to take comfort in their Almighty parent who promised to support them through all things; to consider the glorious resurrection and eternal life where they shall meet the deceased in a short time; and ultimately to 'compose your mind' so that they might

⁹ Philip Doddridge, *Submission to Divine Providence in the Death of Children, recommended and enforced in a Sermon* (London: R. Hett, 1737), iv. For a use of similar rhetoric see Chapter 3.

‘awaken the more delightful passions of hope and joy’.¹⁰ He reiterated this latter command on a number of occasions. When a congregant Tommy Mitchell lost his mother whilst still a teenager, Doddridge told him in the same letter where he broke the news of her death, that ‘love and duty require you to rejoice in her happiness, as much as you mourned for her affliction’. After consoling him with thoughts of salvation and the glory of the afterlife, he asks ‘can you be miserable with all these blessings?’¹¹

Whilst not unique to Doddridge’s sect, the directive to move from grief into joy after the death of a loved one was a distinctive feature of his wider circle’s belief system around death (see also Chapters 4 and 5). Joy, ‘the passion produced by any happy accident; gladness’, as Samuel Johnson defined it, was expected to arise from a Christian’s contemplation of the glory of the afterlife and the realisation that a person’s time on earth was only a moment in eternity, so that separation between saved loved ones was short.¹² As a result, the emotion of ‘Christian joy’ was expected to be felt as ‘a sudden glow in mine heart’, but, perhaps unlike Johnson’s joy that arose from ‘happy accidents’, this should not be ‘a slight superficial transport’. Indeed, it should be distinctly different from earthly joy. As Doddridge puts it: ‘preserve me from mistaking the joy of nature, while it catches a glimpse of its rescue from destruction, for that consent of grace which embraces and ensures the

¹⁰ John Doddridge Humphreys, ed., *The Correspondence and Diary of Philip Doddridge, D.D.* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1829), 1: 285, Philip Doddridge to David Some, 22 October 1723.

¹¹ Humphreys, *Correspondence*, 1: 473, Philip Doddridge to Tommy Mitchell, 7 January 1725.

¹² Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (Dublin: W. G. Jones, 1768), unpaginated, ‘joy’.

deliverance'.¹³ Christian joy was the felt manifestation of the assurance of salvation, a form of elation that was, like grace itself, a sign of God's work in a person's life. Doddridge, with his suspicion of overt enthusiasm, saw this as an emotional practice that should be constant, rather than temporary.

This understanding of joy was rooted in a theology of grace that followed the nonconformist leader, Richard Baxter's, compromise between predestination and free will. He wished for a 'middle-road', where God offers grace – the ability to be saved – to all men, provided that they repented and accepted Christ. However, God only granted a limited number of people the sufficient internal or effectual grace to enable them to repent.¹⁴ For Baxter, in practice, this should give Christian's confidence in their salvation, as the desire to live a holy life reflected their salvation. As he saw it, faith rather than good works enabled the Christian life and ensured salvation. For members of this sect, submission to God's will, or plan, was at the heart of Christian practice. Christians were called upon to accept death as part of God's plan and, according to Doddridge, to reconcile feelings, arising from their human nature, with God's will, and so move into a place not just of contentment or peace, but of joy.¹⁵

Because God had a plan, this theology placed meaning onto all human events, and particularly significant events like the death of a loved one. For Doddridge, death provided an opportunity for God to teach something to those left behind, and in common with the teachings of a range of Christian sects, he asked those in mourning to reflect on the lessons that God was trying provide, and to use that reflection and learning as a form of

¹³ Philip Doddridge, *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (Chiswick: C. Whittingham, 1824), 36.

¹⁴ Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, 138-9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 167.

consolation.¹⁶ Different types of death taught the saved different lessons and Doddridge spent considerable time in his consolatory writings, both published and in private correspondence, exploring the message that could be learned from the death of particular individuals. Child death was no different, as Doddridge discusses at length in his popular sermon.

Titled ‘Submission to Divine Providence in the Death of Children, recommended and enforced’, this sermon is structured around the Old Testament story of a Shunamite mother, who runs to the prophet Elijah upon the death of her young son from illness, perhaps expecting him to perform a miracle. As she approaches his house, Elijah sends out his servant to ask her ‘Is it well with thee? Is it well with thine Husband? Is it well with the Child? And she answers, It is well’.¹⁷ Doddridge then provides four reasons why pious parents might be able to answer ‘It is well’ on the death of their children. The first two reasons emphasise that submission to God’s will requires them to answer ‘It is well’, because ‘Can we *teach him Knowledge? Can we tax him with Injustice?*’.¹⁸ The fourth and final reason lays out the Calvinist theology on infant salvation, which emphasises that children who die before they commit their own sins are automatically saved, before reflecting that we should still be hopeful for the salvation of older children.¹⁹ The third reason however is focused on how the death of children will ‘teach [parents] a Variety of the most instructive and useful Lessons, in a very convincing and effectual Manner’.²⁰

¹⁶ Ronald K. Rittgers, ‘Grief and Consolation in Early Modern Lutheran Devotion: The Case of Johannes Christoph Oelhafen’s *Pious Meditations on the Most Sorrowful Bereavement* (1619)’, *Church History* 81, no. 3 (2012), 601-30. See also Chapter 5.

¹⁷ Doddridge, *Submission to Divine Providence*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22-4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14-22.

The first of these lessons, and one that Doddridge learned from the death of his own daughter Tetsy, is that, 'When God takes away our Children from us, it is a very affecting Lesson of the Vanity of the World'.²¹ Here he emphasises that the love of children often borders on idolatry and so distracts parents from their primary focus on God. The death of a child can, then, be used to refocus the Christian's sights on heaven. This was a very personal concern for Doddridge, who wrote in his diary after his eldest daughter's death, 'there is thine idol laid still in death;- the creature which stood next to God in thine heart'.²² The second lesson, that the 'Removal of our Children by such awful Strokes may warn us of the Approach of our own Death', is similarly identified as a reminder to Christians of the importance of focusing on heaven.²³ The third he saw as 'quicken[ing] us in the Duties of Life, and especially in the Education of surviving Children'. Finally, the death of a child could teach that, 'The Providence before us may have a special Tendency to improve our Resignation to the Divine Will; and if it does so, it will indeed be *well*', not least because complete submission to God would 'ease the labouring Heart, and restore true Serenity'.²⁴

Submission was at the heart of both faith and death for Doddridge, and it was through submission that Christians would find happiness and joy. Death, which encouraged Christians to submit to God and to reflect on heavenly things, should therefore lead to joy. Doddridge did not expect this to be easy. As he noted in his sermon: 'let us not attempt to harden ourselves against our Sorrows by a stern Insensibility, or that sullen Resolution which sometimes says, *It is a Grief, and I must bear it*; but let us labour, (for a *great Labour* it will

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²² Humphreys, *Correspondence*, v, 364, 'Reflections at the Seventy-Eighth Sacrament. Dear Betsey Dead', 3 October 1736.

²³ Doddridge, *Submission to Divine Providence*, 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18, 20 and 21.

indeed be,) to compose and quiet our Souls, calmly to acquiesce in this painful Dispensation, nay, cordially to approve it as in present Circumstances every Way fit'.²⁵ Moving from grief to joy was a labour of spiritual self-reflection and submission to the will of God.

Grief amongst Doddridge's family and friends

The letter from Mary Humphreys that opens this discussion is one of a number where members of this denominational group attempt to perform this labour of quieting the soul and moving towards joy after the death of a relative.²⁶ It forms part of the Doddridge family archive, which holds a significant proportion of the surviving personal correspondence of Philip Doddridge, and his wife and daughter, both named Mercy. It includes letters from other family members, including Mary and her husband, the lawyer John Humphreys, and a wide range of fellow congregants. The letters span the years between the 1720s, when Doddridge was in his late teens to the early nineteenth century, when the younger Mercy died. All members of the Doddridge family, as well as a number of their fellow congregants, used letter-writing as a method of articulating and exploring their feelings on the death of a loved one. Doddridge also used a diary and his public writings to this end. Letter-writing here was at the intersection of spiritual practice, engaging in the Protestant exercise of using writing as a form of exploring one's relationship with God, and consolation.²⁷ The letter,

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁶ The Doddridge family papers are held at Dr William's Library, London under the call number L1.

²⁷ For discussion see David Mullan, *Narratives of the Religious Self in Early Modern Scotland* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

written with an intended reader in mind, seeks for that process of spiritual-emotional work to be collaborative.

Writing has long been recognised as a consolatory practice for the way it enables writers to express and give form to often complex and contradictory emotions arising from death.²⁸ As Han Balthussen argues in the case of Cicero, letter writing provides a space to perform ‘grief work’; that is, to process feeling and to move towards acceptance of his daughter’s death.²⁹ Letter writing could act as a form of self-consolation, of articulating feelings and beliefs in a static and perhaps more authoritative form than thought alone allowed. It could be a space to think about and process what one actually felt in a particular situation, something that might be more fleeting in lived experience as Mary Humphreys suggests in her letter. It was often through correspondence that writers could reconcile felt experience with wider social norms and expectations around appropriate emotion and articulate the abstract in terms that were culturally understood.³⁰

Within an eighteenth-century context, writing about grief, whether in epistolary form, devotional work or as literature, provided an opportunity for sympathetic engagement with readers. A sympathetic model of communication allowed the writer to activate the same or similar feelings in her/his audience through sharing them. Doddridge located this sympathy in

²⁸ Anna Linton, *Poetry and Parental Bereavement in Early Modern Lutheran Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Ulrike Gleixner, ‘Enduring Death in Pietism: Regulating Mourning and the New Intimacy’, in *Enduring Loss in Early Modern Germany: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Lynne Tatlock (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 215-30.

²⁹ Han Balthussen, ‘Cicero’s *Consolatio ad se*: Character, Purpose and Impact of a Curious Treatise’, in *Greek and Roman Consolations. Eight Studies of a Tradition and its Afterlife*, ed. H. Baltussen (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2013), 67-91.

³⁰ Gleixner, ‘Enduring Death’.

scripture, noting in a sermon to young people bereaved of their parents, ‘That there are few precepts of the gospel, which will appear more easy to a humane and generous mind, than that, in which we are required to weep with them that weep’.³¹ His daughter’s letter was written to her mother and sister, who were already aware of Charlotte’s death and who had previously sent Mary letters of consolation. Despite Mary’s expectation that her readers would have themselves grieved and moved towards a sense of joy on this occasion, she recognised that her letter would evoke an emotional response, noting, ‘I write this long letter to make some atonement for the Pain which I fear thro Inadvertancy some part of it will give you’.³² The pain that she foresaw her letter causing was not just the result of the reminder of the death of a beloved grandchild and niece, but that suffered by Mary herself in grieving and the spiritual implications for her relationship with God.

Mary’s letter of loss gave its readers insights into her struggle and a vicarious sense of sharing it. Especially if they had not had a similar experience, reading such an account could be understood to function in the manner of novels, which were intended to provide readers with greater emotional sophistication through imaginatively experiencing other perspectives and cultures.³³ It was also an opportunity for writers to take more active control of the grieving process, allowing them to lessen their grief by instigating sympathetic engagement, rather than waiting for someone to approach them. It may well be that for Calvinists, who saw their emotional response to death as a reflection of their relationship with God, making such a connection and beginning that process of ‘grief work’ may have held greater urgency

³¹ Philip Doddridge, ‘Sermons to Young Persons’, in *The Works of Philip Doddridge* (London: W.J. and J. Richardson et al, 1804), 3: 164.

³² DWL, L1/2/204.

³³ Richards, ‘Providence and Sympathy’.

than for other groups, although processing grief through writing is certainly not unique to them.

In accordance with her upbringing, Mary identified her unruly feelings as a reflection of her human nature, which was rooted in original sin. As such, she viewed her continued grief – and particularly her immoderate grief – as a spiritual threat. Speaking of her spiritual advisor and friend the Marchioness of Huntingdon, Mary observed:

[the] Marchiness me thinks I hear her say Dear Child resume [not] Your Bitter thoughts, harken not unto the Voice of Sorrow for tho the present she may sooth your Grief, Yet trust her not she'll raise a Tempest in your Soul & I Tremble for you lest Driven by the Wind & Tossed you make shipwreck of Faith & a Heart resign'd.³⁴

To overcome this, Mary 'indeavour[ed] by Prayer Good Thoughts Good Deeds & Diligent attention to the Duties of my station to keep my Grief within the Bounds of Reason & religion[.] the lash is arduous'. In this, she not only followed her father's guidance, but advice that she acknowledged that she herself had given on many occasions.

Such advice, commonplace in the letters of consolation shared by Mary's co-religionists, was recognised as being hard to follow, an 'arduous lash', but appears to have been received positively as a marker of love and care between members of the community. Aiding the spiritual health of its members was an important function of the religious community and that Mary chose to place such advice in the mouth of her mentor is suggestive of her desire for consolation in this form. Although Doddridge predeceased Charlotte by over a decade, the legacy of her spiritual heritage may have increased the pressure on Mary to find joy in the death of her child, but her struggle was not unusual.

³⁴ DWL, L1/2/204.

Indeed, it was remarkably similar to Doddridge's own response to the death of his daughter Tetsy, a pain that he articulated and explored in his private diaries and in correspondence with friends, before articulating more formally for a public audience. Like Doddridge's sermon, which comforted him at the same time as it comforted its audience, the sympathetic function of letter-writing located such advice as a consolation to both writer and reader, tying both together in the process of grief work.

One of the difficulties Mary had in processing her feelings was due to the fact she was grieving the death of an infant. According to her Calvinist faith and as she acknowledged in her letter, her daughter's salvation was assured. Intellectually, Mary understood her child's death as a lesson, acknowledging that the 'affliction is much Lighter that I have Deserv'd I Kiss the rod & the Hand that has appointed it'. Given that this was a life-long and strongly held belief, the fact that she found it difficult to remain in a place of joy was especially disconcerting. As far as Mary was concerned, her emotions refused to conform to her belief structure (and it is notable that she ignores that pain and struggle after the death of a loved one were equally part of her emotional and spiritual education, seeking instead the joy of assured salvation). Philip Doddridge thought that the deaths of older children were often harder on parents due to the fact that their salvation was not as assured. This was particularly the case for parents of 'Absaloms' as Doddridge styled them, where their seeming disregard for God and Christianity placed their salvation in question.³⁵ Yet, this questioning over a child's salvation provided an excuse for parental grief, allowing parents to interpret their sorrow as mourning for their child's sin and penance for their failures as parents in educating their children, rather than as a lack of faith per se.

Letters by the grieving parents of older children often explicitly reflected on their child's chances of salvation, describing their character and behaviour, sometimes in

³⁵ Doddridge, *Submission to Divine Providence*, 30.

considerable detail. John Birkett's letter to Doddridge in 1745 informed him of the death of his young teenage son and reflected on how 'the Enemy of Mankind or the Disorder of my own Mind or both turn to my Great Dejection', locating his grief as a product of either Satan's temptations or his own human weakness.³⁶ His grief was informed by an anxiety that he had failed in his duty as a parent and he held 'some Doubts as to his [son's] Eternal well being'. He went on to describe his child's behaviour, numerically counting the pros and cons as he weighed up his likelihood of salvation. He noted on the con side, for example, that 'he was a Child of exuberant Mirth and us'd to come from the school singing Fa laldy Da', but that 'his Mirth was alway Inocent quite free from indecent Expressions'. He noted that his daughters complained of him telling 'little stories beyond the bounds of Truth but to my Knowledge he Never told me one Lie and upon the Strictest examination I find what they complain of were rather little trifling equivocations then Lies'.

On the pro side, he reflected on his son's diligence in reading the New Testament and learning many passages by heart 'without any Encouragement from me' and that he scarce ever omitted morning or evening prayer. Given the considerable length he went to explain and justify behaviour that he considered may not be seemly for a Christian, Birkett was clearly looking to reassure both himself and Doddridge of his child's salvation. That he could explain why he felt grief in terms of his son's sins, rather than in terms of his own loss, and that he could provide concrete evidence of his child's goodness consoled him during this difficult period. That Birkett mourned an older child meant that the death did not provide so significant a spiritual challenge as that felt by Mary Humphreys.

Grieving children

³⁶ DWL, L1/4/104 [John Birkett to Dr Doddridge], 15 March 1745/6.

Like their parents, children were educated from a young age in their spiritual traditions, being taught the principles of the faith, the importance of salvation, and that death was a time for joy as well as grief. When Doddridge died in 1751, his wife wrote a letter of consolation to their five surviving children, all teenagers at that time. She advised them to lean on God to alleviate their 'deep distress', observing that they should praise Him whose consolations have ensured that, despite her 'Exquisite distress', at times she is ready to 'burst out into songs of Praise'.³⁷ She urged their submission to the will of God, to be thankful that they had such a Friend during his life which they did not deserve, and to attempt to imitate him during their lives through fulfilling their spiritual and temporal duties.

Such lessons were also available in Doddridge's sermons on the education of children, where he thought 'while they are babes' children should be taught that they 'are hastening on to death and judgment, and so must enter on heaven and hell, and dwell forever in one or the other' (see also Chapters 4, 5 and 10).³⁸ He repeated this warning in the section of the text directed at the child reader, noting, 'Dear children, consider it; it is but a little while and you must die: And... the great God of heaven and earth will call your souls to his judgment seat. ... death is coming on: perhaps his scythe may cut you down while you are but coming up as flowers. I speak to you thus plainly and earnestly because I do not know but you may be in eternity before another Lord's day'.³⁹ In telling these 'vital truths', Doddridge specifically advised parents to convey 'holy wonder and joy' when explaining Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and to train their children in a dutiful submission to God's will.⁴⁰ In

³⁷ DWL, L1/2/21 Mercy Doddridge to 'My Dear Children', 11 November 1751.

³⁸ Philip Doddridge, *Sermons on the Religious Education of Children* (Amherst: Samuel Cushing, 1797), 52.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 97

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

this, he expected parents to model the appropriate emotional responses to death and salvation to their children as part of their religious education.

Indeed, conveying the right balance of emotions to children in their religious education was a key issue for Doddridge, where parents were to take ‘great care’ that ‘we do not fill their minds with an aversion’ to the Father God in discussing God’s wrath and judgement, but emphasis should be placed on the life of Christ and ‘when their little hearts are awed and melted’, ‘we should tell them, it was thus he ... died for us’.⁴¹ Religious education therefore required that parent’s directed their children’s emotions towards the ends of the Church and that they modelled the appropriate emotional responses to the story of Christ for their children to emulate.

Whilst we do not have any consolatory letters written by children, descriptions of grieving children suggest that they tried to conform to the social expectations modelled to them by parents. Caleb Ashworth noted that he was amazed at his children’s response to his wife’s death. He observed to Mercy Doddridge, that he had asked himself ‘how is it possible they can sustain what is surely coming? They who are ready to faint & die when a changed countenance suggests danger, how can they bear the fatal hour’, but that:

they have been composed to a degree that has astonished me: It seems to me that God gave them tenderness of Heart & strength of affection that enabled them to do all that was desired, or possible, that could give satisfaction with ease & delight, & then wonderfully restrained that affection when it could answer no end but afflict them.⁴²

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁴² DWL, L1/4/46 Caleb Ashworth to Mercy Doddridge (Senior), 5 December 1772.

He concludes that 'It is not to be wondered at that a gloom hangs on all our minds; but we are not miserable; tis a happiness to us, we can talk of our deceased friend without being melancholy'. Whilst Ashworth describes his children conforming to the ideal norms for mourning amongst this community, he saw this as active working of God in their lives, rather than their own personal emotional-spiritual labour.

A similar tension arose when Caleb Ashworth's daughter Dolly was dying as a young teenager. He describes how she showed tenderness for her family but 'in general she talks to us in the language of complacency & consolation', which was a great comfort to them.⁴³ Dolly evidenced her salvation through her 'good death', which provided assurance to her family. His son's emotional resilience to the situation, however, was not understood using the same religious barometer. Caleb noted that: 'Our greatest earthly comfort is that my Son is with us, who has affection enough to dispose him to perform every office in the tenderest manner, but not enough to over power him. He compleatly feels as a Son & a Brother, but not as a Father or a sister'. Interestingly, when contrasted with his interpretation of his children's emotion at the death of his wife, Caleb explains his son's ability to cope with his sister's terminal illness as a reflection of the nature of their relationship, rather than the working of God in his life. In both cases, children were not thought to be responsible for their own performances of appropriate grief, with Ashworth looking for alternative explanations for their behaviour from wider cultural tropes, religious or otherwise.

Other letters also suggest that the young had less capacity to cope with loss and there is often considerable surprise articulated when precocious children successfully achieve godly norms, in terms of grieving but also in other aspects of their lives. When Ashworth, who had taken over Doddridge's school after his death, lost a young pupil, he notes his extraordinary piety in the lead up to his death:

⁴³ DWL, L1/4/52 Caleb Ashworth to Mercy Doddridge (Senior), 19 November 1774.

It was very remarkable that he had almost from his coming hither a presage of his End; he often told his fellow pupils that he should not live to the Vacation. He chose the spot where he would lye in the yard, & visited it several times in a week, & Oct 8 (5 weeks before he was took amiss) he wrote a paper, which he called his will, ... he was observed by his neighbours to be uncommonly fervent in praying by himself in his Closet & they could hear his voice as if he was much affected.⁴⁴

In contrast, some of his fellow pupils 'are somewhat ill & all greatly alarmed & shocked' at the death. Ashworth, very much a man of his faith, concluded 'I wish it may do us all good'.

The difficulty young people had in submitting to God's will was not because they were educated to grieve differently – as noted above, children were provided with the same advice as adults and expected to follow that advice for their spiritual health. Rather, it appears that childhood was viewed as a period of spiritual, as well as temporal, development, during which children were not held to the same standard as their elders. In his writing Doddridge encourages parents to educate children with love, tenderness and patience, noting that: 'Your children will forget what you have once taught them; repeat it a second time; and if they forget it the second time, repeat it the third'.⁴⁵ He also advises parents to begin with the fundamentals of Christianity, moving to more complex ideas 'as their understandings and capacities will permit them to take it in'.⁴⁶ This was often in tension with the belief that once children moved past infancy they became accountable to God for their sinful nature and personal guilt. In practice, however, rather than expecting children to show immediate

⁴⁴ DWL, L1/3/191 Caleb Ashworth to Mercy Doddridge (Senior), 22 November 1757.

⁴⁵ Doddridge, *Sermons on the Religious Education*, 59.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

spiritual maturity, this placed a greater obligation on parents to take responsibility for their child's spiritual welfare during this period of vulnerability.

As children grew older, they were increasingly expected to assume responsibility for their own relationship with God. In his sermon to 'young persons' who had been orphaned, Doddridge urges his audience that if 'your hearts are almost overwhelmed within you', 'fly into his presence, prostrate yourselves before him with humble importunity, and turn your tears of sorrow into tears of devotion'.⁴⁷ Like his adult congregants, these youths are advised that through God alone, will the soul be exalted 'to the most triumphant joy'.⁴⁸ Yet, even in this sermon, the numerous references to the loss of advice and care that young people suffered when being orphaned, as well as the need for 'generous persons' to take care of them, is suggestive that Doddridge did not see youth as a period of spiritual maturity. Indeed, much of the advice in his series of sermons for young people replicates that given to parents in his sermons on educating children and notably both contain a lengthy discussion on the importance of avoiding 'bad company' that is suggestive that adolescents are captured under the umbrella of 'childhood'. For Doddridge's circle then, childhood was a distinctive but lengthy stage between infancy, when dying children were automatically saved, and adulthood. When no longer infants, children were regarded as having achieved spiritual accountability in the eyes of God but remained vulnerable since they did not have the maturity to manage that responsibility. This placed a burden on parents to educate them in appropriate spiritual behaviour.

Conclusion

⁴⁷ Doddridge, 'Sermons to Young Persons', 180.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

The need for submission to God's will and a firm belief in salvation and the pleasures awaiting in the afterlife fundamentally underpinned how the Doddridge Circle understood death and their grieving practices – the death of a loved one became a spiritual opportunity or exercise to be worked through to enable the soul to find the joy that came with the surety of salvation. Letter-writing provided this sect with the opportunity to perform such 'grief work', allowing them to articulate and address their pain whilst also affirming their strong belief in salvation and knowledge of the joys that should result in the contemplation of death. Whilst death in infancy gave parents surety of their children's salvation, the pain experienced at their loss was sometimes more threatening to their sense of their own faith, than grief at the death of the older child, which could be articulated in terms of anxiety over the child's redemption. These spiritual beliefs were passed on to their children through advice literature, sermons, letters from family and friends, and through everyday lessons taught by their parents and family members. As childhood was a period of growth and transition, children were not expected to grieve like adults. The appropriate response to death then was shaped not only by religious belief, but understandings of a person's place in the life course.