

## WESLEY'S AESTHETIC PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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In this article, I develop a new concept of theological aesthetics, while also showing that John Wesley's theology was aesthetic.<sup>2</sup> Wesley's theology, in this context, is understood as practical theology, by which I mean the particular academic discipline of theology that studies how one's theology influences one's faith and life practices, and vice versa.<sup>3</sup> I call this particular theological aesthetics "engaged aesthetics" because the term indicates the importance of engaging the body and the imagination, and of engaging in reflecting theologically on one's own and others' experiences. Engaged aesthetics can address life more comprehensively than can purely intellectual theology, by addressing five aspects of aesthetics that I will explore. After a short history of aesthetics, I present the five elements of theological aesthetics, art theory, as well as insights from the science of knowing and experience, that form the core of engaged aesthetics. I chose these elements as important facets in the work of some contemporary scholars on aesthetics. These are also facets that I recognize as characteristics of Wesley's practical theology.

### *What is Aesthetics?*

Histories of aesthetics refer to Greek antiquity as the period in which Western philosophical thinking and writing about beauty and art originated. Plato's writings on art and beauty are still influential today. He defined terms and described issues such as the connection of art to craft, art as imitation, the function of art, and the transcendentals—Truth, Goodness, and Beauty—as the highest virtues. Plato understood beauty broadly; with Socrates, he viewed beauty as that which is suitable to its purpose and, with the Sophists, as what pleases the eyes and ears. Following the Pythagoreans, beauty for Plato had its foundation in proportion, balance, measure, order, and harmony. In addition, Plato measured the beauty of things to the degree it conformed with the Idea of Beauty, an attribute of Reality and inspired by the gods. Beauty was not solely characterized by experience, but rather by philosophizing, thereby including the soul and abstract ideas as beautiful. The arts in Plato's time could not garner his approval. He considered them neither morally useful, nor true. Painting, poetry, and music did not fit Plato's criteria for beauty; they were frivolous, false, and misleading because they deviated from the perfect Ideal.

Aristotle treated aesthetics differently. He based his ideas on the work of philosophers, but also on the work of artists. Salient features of Aristotle's aesthetics are his emphasis on art as human activity, and his insistence that art is both *knowledge* about the rules of production, and

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<sup>1</sup> This article provides a distillation of chapter three of my dissertation, "John Wesley and Engaged Aesthetics: Transformative Christian Education," Boston University, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> I exclusively treat the Western history of the philosophy of art and of beauty, not because the history of non-Western aesthetics proves uninteresting or unimportant, but because of my focus on John Wesley in England.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter two of "John Wesley and Engaged Aesthetics." This type of enquiry can also shed light on the gap between what people profess to believe and what they actually believe as shown by their practices. For instance, Christians may say they believe that "God loves all people" but by making their places of worship and their fellowship inhospitable to outsiders, their message and theology really is "God loves people who are like us."

the *production* of the artifact. Whereas Plato considered the arts imitating life as negative, for Aristotle, dramaturges, actors, and poets could surpass the representation of reality and imbue art with their personal expressions. Aristotle, in contrast to Plato, considered the arts to be moral and virtuous in themselves, as they included both artistic truth and cognitive truth. While Plato considered the arts misleading because of their pull at our feelings, to Aristotle the arts could function as a vicarious experience of emotions. Aristotle's conditions for beauty were rooted in Plato, but he emphasized that something of beauty must be suitable to the senses, imagination and memory. The phrase "There is nothing in the understanding that was not first in the senses" is representative of Aristotle's thought.<sup>4</sup>

In subsequent centuries, philosophers, theologians, historians and artists interpreted and expanded upon the theories of Plato and Aristotle. The study of art and beauty contains many aspects: objective and subjective aesthetics, psychological and sociological aesthetics, descriptive and prescriptive aesthetics, aesthetic theory and aesthetic politics, aesthetic facts and aesthetic explanation, philosophical and particular aesthetics (i.e. written by artists), aesthetics of the arts ("direct" and "sensuous" art) and aesthetics of literature ("intellectual" and "symbolic" art).<sup>5</sup> Concepts of aesthetics reached their enduring form in the Renaissance with the revival of classical art.

### *Contemporary Theological Aesthetics*

Although not seismic, several gradual changes transformed classical aesthetics into modern aesthetics. Aesthetics after the 1700s included the idea, for instance, that, besides harmony, tension and contrasts can also be pleasing; or that beautiful things can appeal to the emotions or the imagination and not only to reason.

Contemporary understanding of aesthetics owes much to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, an eighteenth-century German philosopher, who used the concept of aesthetics in a new way, changing its meaning from "sensation" to the "science of sensory cognition." He developed a theory of the art of thinking beautifully, which he also called the art of forming taste. Subsequent Enlightenment thinkers adopted Baumgarten's theory, with the unfortunate consequence that aesthetics became separated from logic, ethics, and theology. This development presupposed a partition, namely a Cartesian separation between the mind (or spirit) and body. The work of aesthetic theologians in the twentieth and twenty-first century can be characterized by the efforts to bring aesthetics back to a broader, holistic meaning which includes its religious and theological aspects. Most of these aesthetic theologians have a specific point of view, or emphasis in their work. My new approach of engaged aesthetics serves to reflect more holistically on theology.

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<sup>4</sup> Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 1: Ancient Aesthetics (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 138-155.

<sup>5</sup> Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics*, vol. 1, 1-4.

## *Theological Aesthetics*

Theological aesthetics has been approached in many ways. These multiple possibilities indicate, on the one hand, the fluidity of the still developing field of theological aesthetics, and, on the other hand, the complexity of this field. For my purposes, Kenton Stiles' categorization will prove most helpful, as I explain in what way Wesley's theology can be considered an aesthetic theology. Stiles lays out four categories of intersection between theology and art:<sup>6</sup>

1. *Theology and the arts*: any interaction of theology with aesthetics, art history, art making, art theory, art criticism.
2. *Doctrinal theological aesthetics*: doctrines, such as creation, incarnation, Christology, that can be "explored in terms of aesthetics/the aesthetic."
3. *Fundamental theological aesthetics*: a systematic theology developed through the aesthetic.
4. *Aesthetic theology*: theology in creative expressions, e.g. music, homiletics, liturgy.

### *Wesley's Theological Aesthetics*

When applied to Wesley's practical theology, we can conclude the following in regards to Stiles' four categories:

*Ad 1. Theology and the arts.* Wesley did not purposefully sets out to interpret art in a theological way. For him, the enjoyment of the arts should never supplant or overshadow the real joy of life, which is to know Christ and make him known. This is clear from the tension in Wesley's own comments on pleasing aesthetic experiences. He devalued aesthetic experiences, not because of any innate characteristic of the arts, but because the satisfaction received through the experience should not supplant the desire for the divine, and thus lead to idolatry.

One could argue that the poetry and hymns of both John and Charles Wesley fall into the category of art interpreted theologically. The hymns were exceptional aids to conversion and catechesis of new believers. The Wesleys' poetic arts were so powerful because "[the hymns] brought back lyricism in praise and gave a place to the religious affections in an age of rationalism and formalism."<sup>7</sup> John, however, valued Charles's literary talent for its service to the gospel. He wrote in the eulogy for Charles, "His least praise was his talent for poetry."<sup>8</sup> John's evangelistic concern and his practicality in feeding his flock with good spiritual nourishment prevailed over any aesthetic consideration. We can conclude that Wesley did not articulate a theological approach to aesthetics. However, in light of his writings on taste, we might conclude that beauty is part of the realm of human experiences and part of the holy life when enjoyed "in

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<sup>6</sup> Kenton Stiles, "Theological Aesthetics: A Wesleyan Sampling of Cuisine," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 45, no. 1. (2007): 170n17, although he presents the categories in a different order.

<sup>7</sup> From Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Watts and Wesley to Martineau, 1690-1900*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 235.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley, *Annual Minutes and Conference Journal*, 1788, in *The Methodist Societies: The Minutes of Conference*, ed. Henry D. Rack, vol. 10 of *The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 10:646, hereafter cited as *Works*.

virtue, in gratitude, and in disinterested benevolence.”<sup>9</sup> This synopsis gives space for the inclusion of the aesthetic within the fullness of Christian perfection.

*Ad 2. and 3. Doctrinal theological aesthetics and Fundamental theological aesthetics.* Wesley’s theology was not systematic but focused on Christian living. He did not set out to theologize about the philosophy of aesthetics, neither did he develop one doctrine or his whole theology on aesthetic terms. However, this does not mean that Wesley was ignorant of aesthetic philosophy.

The eighteenth century saw a lively debate on the topic of taste and beauty, often linked to ethics, in which three main streams of thought can be distinguished.<sup>10</sup> The *internal sense theory* located original Beauty in the divine mind; it can be perceived only rationally and disinterestedly, through the internal sense. That which is experienced through the external senses by the human mind points to beauty that represents the designer’s mind, who’s mind in turn is designed by the Divine Mind. The *imagination theory* placed the pleasure of taste in the imagination. Beauty exists as an idea only, dependent on who perceived what. This theory was relative and idealistic, against the absolute and realistic internal sense theory. The *association theory* of aesthetics bridged the internal sense and the imagination theories. This theory states that the human sense of beauty is internal, but the imagination and memories help the perception of beauty by way of association of ideas.

Wesley was well aware of the debate, had read many of the writings and, characteristically, had made up his own mind on the place and value of aesthetics. In fact, the lack of engagement with this debate in his own theological writings gives an important clue to the place of aesthetics in his thinking. At the same time, we can find resonances of the ongoing discussion throughout Wesley’s sermons, journals, and publishing. And Wesley responded to the contemporary debate with his own essay, “Thoughts Upon Taste,” which incorporated views of the leading voices at the time. He first gave his own definition of taste,

[Taste] is certainly a faculty of the mind, analogous to the sense of taste. By the external sense we relish various foods, and distinguish one from the other. By the internal, we relish and distinguish various foods offered to the mind. Taste is therefore that internal sense which relishes [i.e. perceives with pleasure] and distinguishes its proper object.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Wesley makes his own distinction between the external senses as purely physical and the internal senses as solely mental. His division is simple, and even simplistic: pleasure comes either from the mind or from the body.

As Wesley continued to expound on taste, though, it became clear that the issue was more complex than a mere dualism between mind and body. He recognized that he was dealing with a matter of audience. Especially his use of analogy to explain taste as a faculty of the mind similar

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<sup>9</sup> Wesley, “Thoughts upon Taste,” §10, vol. 13 of *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 13:468, hereafter cited as *Works* (Jackson).

<sup>10</sup> See “John Wesley and Engaged Aesthetics” for more detailed background information.

<sup>11</sup> Wesley, “Thoughts upon Taste,” §6, vol. 13, *Works* (Jackson): 466.

to the taste of the tongue, hints by its simplification at a desire to make a complex and convoluted philosophical idea understandable. His goal was not just the increase of knowledge, but—as is clear from the rest of his essay—personal improvement for his readers. In the next few paragraphs, Wesley outlined four kinds of [aesthetic] taste, depending on the objects under observation:<sup>12</sup>

1. a taste for “objects of understanding,” such as metaphysics or mathematics, in which case taste includes not only being capable of understanding the topic, but also finding pleasure in its study.
2. a taste for objects “that gratify the imagination,” be it a taste “for grandeur, for novelty, or for beauty.” Here Wesley emphasizes that there is a great variety in this kind of taste: some like grandeur, others like novelty or beauty; some like beauty in art, others in nature, some have a taste for both.
3. a taste for “the happiness of our fellow-creatures ... (whether by nature, or from a higher principle),” which Wesley considers to be part of human nature “in many, if not in all.”
4. a taste for “the beauty in virtue, in gratitude, and disinterested [i.e. not self-focused] benevolence,” which Wesley extolled above the other kinds of taste as infinitely more valuable and an infinitely more delicate pleasure.

After arguing that everyone has some degree of internal taste, Wesley defended the need for “fine taste.” Although fine taste had previously been restricted to “the beauties of writing,” Wesley asked, “Should it not rather be [that faculty of mind] ‘which discerns all that is grand or beautiful, in the works both of art and nature?’”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Wesley told his readers that

Such a taste as this is much to be desired, and that on many accounts. It greatly increases those pleasures of life, which are not only innocent, but useful. It qualifies us to be of far greater service to our fellow-creatures. It is more especially desirable for those whose profession calls them to converse with many; seeing it enables them to be more agreeable, and consequently more profitable, in conversation.<sup>14</sup>

Wesley’s essay differed from the aesthetes in several ways. His four categories of taste were new. He made distinctions, not on the basis of the location or perception of beauty, but on the basis of the objects of perception: first, ideas; second, representations in the imagination (of art objects or nature); third, specific human beings; fourth, humankind and society in general. He did not speculate about the idealist or rational character of beauty, nor did he discuss beauty over against sublimity. Although Wesley included virtue and benevolence, it was separated from the happiness of others, since it was the love of God which bestowed virtue and benevolence.<sup>15</sup> Also, Wesley did not differentiate between the various sources of pleasure in the way the philosophers

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<sup>12</sup> Wesley, “Thoughts upon Taste,” §7, in *Works* (Jackson), 13:466-467

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, §13, 13:468.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, §14, 13:468-9.

<sup>15</sup> Wesley, sermon 90, “An Israelite Indeed,” §1-2, in *Works*, 3:279.

did. This taste may, to some degree, be inborn, but it can be acquired and improved by reading “the writings of the best authors,” and by “conversation with men of genius.”<sup>16</sup> By doing so, “we may learn to correct whatever is yet amiss in our taste, as well as to supply whatever we or they perceive to be still wanting, all which may be directed to that glorious end, the ‘pleasing all men for their good unto edification.’”<sup>17</sup> In his treatment of aesthetics, Wesley was guided, as in the other areas of life, by his evangelical concerns.

*Ad 4. Aesthetic theology.* Although Wesley never consciously set out to “do theology aesthetically,” this is exactly his contribution to theological aesthetics. Wesley practiced his theology—what he strove for and what he actually practiced—in a way that is beautiful. However, here “beautiful” does not mean pleasing to the senses, but it is rather a kind of aesthetic beauty that is expressed in virtue, gratitude, and selfless benevolence, inspired by the love of God. The aesthetic character of Wesley’s practical theology will be visible in light of the five elements of engaged aesthetics.

### *Engaged (Theological) Aesthetics*

“Engaged aesthetics” a synthesis of several aspects of theological aesthetics and art theory, as well as insights from the science of knowing and experience. It is theological in nature and consists of the following aspects: embodiment, form-giving, foregrounding, paying attention, and holding in tension.

#### *Embodiment*

The first aspect, *embodiment*, points to the important role of the body in the formation of meaning and to the holistic nature of beauty and art, as they have the power to involve not only the mind but all of a person. The Reformed philosopher James A.K. Smith developed an aesthetic anthropology in which human beings are “*affective* animals whose worlds are made more by the imagination than by the intellect—... humans are those desiring creatures who live off of stories, narrative, images, and the stuff of *poiesis* [lit. “making”].”<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, human beings cannot *not* worship and those worship practices fundamentally form humans into who humans are. The body plays a significant role in Christian formation, because we form habits—be they explicitly Christian or unconsciously secular—that determine how we stand in the world, based on the people, things and ideas we love and desire. These habits are always expressed through our body.

The work of Smith helps us understand not only the importance of the body *per se*, but the deep theological implications of fleshly existence and the possibilities for personal and communal transformation these implications carry, because human bodies are one hundred

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<sup>16</sup> Wesley, “Thoughts upon Taste,” §16-17, 13:469.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, §17, 13:469.

<sup>18</sup> James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), xii (emphasis in original). Smith developed his aesthetic anthropology (although he does not use this term) in the book *Desiring the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

percent involved in why, what, and how people worship. Intentionality, awareness and reflection on the connections between body and worship are necessary for people to be consistent in belief and action.

### *Form-giving*

The second element, *form-giving*, concerns the shaping of concepts and beliefs into concrete forms, habits and actions. The eminent example of form-giving in theological aesthetics is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, as the embodied image, *εἰκὼν*, of God. The Swiss Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar in his aesthetic theology focused on the Incarnation of the Word, which enables us to *see* the form of God. The Christian life, then, exists in revealing who God is:

To be a Christian is precisely a form. How could it be otherwise, since being a Christian is a grace, a possibility of existence opened up to us by God's active justification, by the God-Man's act of redemption? This is not the formless, general possibility of an alleged freedom, but the exact possibility, appointed by God for every individual in his existence as a member of Christ's body, in his task within the body, in his mission, his charism, his Christian service to the church and to the world. Considered in all its dimensions, what could be more holistic, indissoluble, and at the same time more clearly contoured than this form of being a Christian?<sup>19</sup>

In von Balthasar, the form of Christ, seeing the form of Christ and becoming the form of Christ for others to see, are all inextricably linked to the revelation of God's glory.

Faith is strongly connected to knowledge, for von Balthasar; not as a disembodied knowing, but an intimate, embodied knowing of God in the Old Testament sense of spiritual-physical intimacy between a man and a woman. Faith is a response of the *whole human being* to God's revelation; it is the experience of meeting God in body and soul.

Von Balthasar's work emphasizes that God's revelation of God-self in the incarnate Christ is an aesthetic, full-bodied event. A deep understanding and reception of the materiality of God-in-Christ is inextricably linked to the knowing of God, in and through embodied practices and actions. These are practices in the context of the worship service, e.g. folding hands and closing eyes in prayer, extending open hands to receive the benediction, kneeling to receive communion; but also actions that express faith in God and praise to God in service to others, from curbing one's tongue to feeding the homeless and marching in protest of social injustice. As the incarnate Christ was the visible form of God, so Christians are to be the visible form of Christ.

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<sup>19</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1961), 27.

### *Foregrounding*

The third element, *foregrounding*, indicates the activity of the spiritual senses, as they guide the imagination of the heart. In that spiritual, affective, and moral center, the imagination participates in the biblical paradox, characterized by Jesus, of the first being the last, and the last being first. Alejandro García-Rivera develops the concept of foregrounding in his theological aesthetics, *The Community of the Beautiful*, as a contribution from the Latin-American church. Where von Balthasar described the reconciliation of God and human beings through the aesthetic of seeing the form, García-Rivera shifts the emphasis from seeing “form” to seeing “difference,” namely the differences between people. Once this difference is acknowledged, the work of reconciliation between people can take place.

García-Rivera’s theological aesthetics expresses the seeing of difference through the act of “lifting up” certain elements or people that are normally in the background, thereby “foregrounding” them and elevating them in value.<sup>20</sup> This is the work of the imagination in the heart and it forms the basis of García-Rivera’s aesthetic principle, as expressed in Mary’s words “[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52). The act of lifting up the lowly, or foregrounding, expresses the way God’s Beauty is embodied.

Several emphases in the work of García-Rivera and other U.S. Latinx theologians are helpful.<sup>21</sup> First, the imagination plays an important role in theological aesthetics, as it entails a newness of seeing, interacting, and valuing. The holistic process of meaning-making supports the U.S. Latinx hermeneutic of grounding theology in daily, embodied life, since faith and theological reflection can only make sense when they are connected to the other elements of living. Furthermore, a new way of seeing means paying attention to people who are at the periphery of society, often unseen. Foregrounding entails a willingness to see and a re-evaluation of what is now lifted up.

Second, the aesthetic movement of truly seeing and being moved by what is seen—away from one’s center to make room for those on the margin—has consequences. Seeing must involve acting on what is now seen. García-Rivera challenges the existing Christian vision to commit fully to the empowerment and liberation of the poor and oppressed. Although not every community of faith will include U.S. Latinx marginalized people, every community of faith includes and is surrounded by people who are in the background: other ethnicities, other-gendered people, disabled people, people not in our age group, people in different socio-economic classes, people with different sexual orientation, etc. The aesthetic move of foregrounding is necessary in order to see the differences of people as God sees them, to see God *in* the differences among people, and then to act on behalf and in favor of those who are different in order to include them in the Kingdom of God.

### *Paying Attention*

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<sup>20</sup> García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 167.

<sup>21</sup> See also the work of, for instance, Roberto S. Goizueta and Cecilia Conzález-Andrieu.



The fourth element of engaged aesthetics is *paying attention*. All connotations of aesthetics—the philosophy of beauty, the study of art, or the theory of meaning-making—imply the need for attentiveness beyond the cursory glance that suffices for everyday perception. Paying attention indicates that, if people would take the time to reflect on what is before them, some knowledge may be discovered: a feeling, a memory, an insight in the ‘why’ or ‘how’ of some conundrum, connections to other experiences, and perhaps, new meaning out of all of these components.

In *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning*, Frank Burch Brown relates aesthetics to religion through reflective seeing. For Burch Brown perceiving is the act of seeing something for what it is, but perception also includes other modes of understanding that provide the context for what is seen: “[t]he act of seeing-as is here conditioned by seeing-in-relation.”<sup>22</sup> In the reflection process of making meaning, various concepts can come together in such a way as to create “a surplus of meaning.”

Theology is grounded in symbols, and affirms faith as an inexplicable mystery. The gift that art brings to theology is that it makes grace visible, while exploring through fiction, metaphors, and experiences, that which cannot be contained in formal theology. Moreover, art adds a depth of experience that cannot be expressed in theological discourse and this provides a creative tension which promotes both theological and aesthetic wonder. Art reveals theology’s richness. The requirement for discovering these theological treasures is to take the time to reflect on one’s beliefs and experiences, and to be open to discover new meaning.

Other fruitful contributions to this aspect of engaged aesthetics have come from the fields of epistemology—how people know what they know—and phenomenology—how people perceive and understand their experiences. These insights show a remarkable overlap of how people know through art and faith, and of the kind of experiences they have with art and faith. In *Virtual Art as Theology*, Barbara Dee Bennett Baumgarten brings these insights together as follows.<sup>23</sup> In the case of art, the artist’s and viewer’s reservoirs of resources, i.e. all one’s previous knowledge and life experiences which the brain uses to make meaning, determine which characteristics the artist and viewer attend to and how they form these into a whole observation and its meaning. Variations in this process of integration account for the existence of different artistic styles. In painting, for example, different locations produce different depictions—even of the same object—as well as different viewings and interpretations of the selfsame artifact.<sup>24</sup> Out of this process of integrating the parts into a whole, a new kind of knowledge arises, which is no longer unattended but rather focal – although it may still be inexpressible. The newly found meaning becomes part of the lived reality, the location, from which people fund new discoveries. For the whole creative process of moving from idea to fulfillment, from parts to whole, from experience to meaning—both in making and viewing—an “indwelling” is necessary, a committed attending to particulars. Furthermore, the absorption of

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<sup>22</sup> Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 33.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Dee Bennett Baumgarten, *Virtual Art as Theology* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1994).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 51-55.

the new meaning into our existing fund of knowledge necessitates a willingness to deal with the consequences of the new meaning, with the risk that this new meaning will demand changes in the viewer's life.

An important element in (theological) aesthetic meaning-making is the role of the imagination. As John Dewey expressed it in his book *Art as Experience*, the imagination is an activity, "a way of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole."<sup>25</sup> Imagination is also the result; "It is the large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world. When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination."<sup>26</sup> Imagination means being attentive and learning how to see, integrating elements to form new meaning and reflecting on that experience and meaning. The imagination operates as the integrator between a person, object or concept currently under scrutiny, and the reservoir of experiences, memories, feelings, images, values, opinions, beliefs, etc. that form human beings into who they are. It makes new connections, in an effort to place the experience at hand in the larger scheme of who one is. The more time is devoted to this process of ruminating and reflecting, the better, deeper and more abundant the networks of meaning become. With careful reflection, theology can reveal new dimensions of aesthetics and aesthetics can bring a transformative lens to theology, opening up the riches of the revelatory and prophetic power of theology.

### *Holding in Tension*

The last element of engaged aesthetics, *holding matters in tension*, refers to the ability to adjourn the resolution of two or more concepts, practices, or interpretations that seem to be at odds, or even antithetical. Rather than moving quickly to solve the tension, the capacity of "suspending judgment" will enable participants to engage deeper with the issue at hand: revisiting the options, attending to details to gain more information, listening to others' reasoning, and possibly gaining new insights. The necessity and potential of sustaining irresolution for a while, is illustrated by a scholar in aesthetic education, Philip Yenawine, who works in close association with the foremost researcher of education in museum studies, Abigail Housen. As education director of the Museum of Modern Science in New York (1983-1993), Yenawine and colleagues developed Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to help museum visitors enhance their viewing skills. Some of these skills are also important for engaged aesthetics.

Visual art is "thick" with possible interpretations and meanings.<sup>27</sup> In the "thickness" of art, feelings are embedded along with information, "triggering a full range of responses from

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<sup>25</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005 [1934]), 278, emphasis in original.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> The anthropologist Clifford Geertz borrowed the notion of "thick description" from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle. See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6-7. Geertz used the term to describe the work of ethnography, namely to "construct a reading of . . . a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which [the ethnographer] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render" (10). Constructing meaning in visual art concerns a similar wealth of ideas, interwoven

those who look at it thoughtfully.”<sup>28</sup> The range of possible interpretations of a work of art allows leeway; the longer we look, the more we see. With more time, we can recognize more symbols and metaphors and construct meaning between the separate elements. Visual art provides an avenue for contemplation that includes the capacity to hold two or more ideas that seem to be in tension with each other. The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a teaching method where finding meaning in art is presented as a form of problem solving, i.e. combining available information with unknown or puzzling components. The process, guided by questions from the facilitator, follows a strategy of discovery:

- Look carefully.
- Talk about what you observe.
- Back up your ideas with evidence.
- Listen to and consider the view of others.
- Discuss and hold as possible a variety of interpretations.<sup>29</sup>

In the VTS discovery, the facilitator follows a script of specific questions and responses to encourage viewers to connect at a deep level to the art, informed by one’s own and others’ perceptions and ideas, beyond the first unreflective response.

I am especially interested in the element of “holding as possible a variety of interpretations” as a transformative practice. Holding several ideas as possible at the same time points to mystery, to not knowing all the answers. Yenawine argues that “it is the kind of thinking that allows us to deal comfortably with subjects and situations that are not simple or easy to put into cubbyholes—like most of science, much of medicine, and many issues in society. To be able to tackle problems in these arenas, we have to be able to look at them from many sides and consider multiple solutions.”<sup>30</sup>

It is also the kind of thinking that allows Christians to grow spiritually, when previously held ideas or beliefs are deepened, challenged, or changed. Moreover, in an increasingly polarized society, the ability to hold several ideas in tension—without having to be “right” or to have all the answers—may be an important element of loving one’s neighbor as oneself.

The thickness of visual art provides many ways to engage and connect, according to one’s own reservoir of meaning and experiences. Furthermore, the research on which VTS is based, shows the effectiveness of purposeful and communal reflection, creating the capacity to “see” more and withhold judgment for a while. This capacity can be strengthened to function not only in reflection on art, but in reflection in general. Holding ideas in tension is not easy, however. The human tendency is to resolve tension; think, for instance, of story arcs in films, resolution in the last bars of music, stretching muscles after flexing them. Nevertheless, that

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with one another, and often expressed in ways that are unfamiliar, unorthodox and not easily grasped. In that sense I use the term “thick” in relation to visual art.

<sup>28</sup> Philip Yenawine, *Visual Thinking Strategies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

space of suspended judgment is indispensable for transformation. It is the holding that gives rise to new meaning. Moreover, the realization that more than one view is possible becomes, itself, a fertile and paradigm-shifting insight.

### *Wesley and Engaged Aesthetics*

Obviously, Wesley's writings and work in the eighteenth century do not reflect twentieth-century insights into the rich and dynamic relationship between theology and aesthetics. Wesley did not reflect theologically—in a sustained or structured way—on the art he encountered. Neither did he employ educational strategies that included art. However, it is possible to distill the core principles of the five aesthetic movements above and recognize these as underlying structures in Wesley's practical theology.

### *Wesley and Embodiment*

Embodiment in theology means that the body is purposefully and consciously involved in formative practices. This is what makes worship holistic, i.e. loving God with one's whole heart, body, mind, and soul (Mark 12-30). It also implies that whatever Christians do in and through their bodies has theological consequences. Finally, the participation of the body in worship and spiritual growth shows how important the affections—experiences in and through the body—are in personal and communal faith.

Important for this characteristic of engaged aesthetics is Wesley's involvement in works of mercy, such as almsgiving and visiting the sick and the poor. These vehicles of God's grace were *enacted bodily* by Wesley himself and by the Methodists and the works of mercy served the *physical needs* of people. Wesley considered the Christian faith to encompass the whole person. He accorded an important role to the "affections"—emotions, inclinations and the will—in the process of sanctification as believers grow in grace.<sup>31</sup> While it sometimes looks as if Wesley preferred or emphasized the spiritual realm, the physical world was impossible for him to separate from the spiritual. God had created both and provided healing and restoration for both. That the two realms affected one another, was the concern of every Christian. Moreover, every follower of Christ was called to serve others, as much as possible, regarding their physical as well as spiritual needs.

For Wesley, living as a Christian involved all aspects of human existence, including the body. An example of how Wesley saw the importance of embodied ministry is found in his sermon "On Visiting the Sick:"

One great reason why the rich, in general, have so little sympathy for the poor, is, because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is, that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know: they keep out of the way of knowing it; and then plead their voluntary ignorances an excuse for their hardness of heart. 'Indeed, Sir,'

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<sup>31</sup> Gregory S. Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989).

said a person of large substance, ‘I am a very compassionate man. But, to tell you the truth, I do not know anybody in the world that is in want.’ How did this come to pass? Why, he took good care to keep out of their way; and if he fell upon any of them unawares ‘he passed over on the other side.’<sup>32</sup>

Ministry does not get more embodied than when cleaning up sick persons, taking care of their wounds, and providing for their physical comfort.

For Wesley embodiment pervaded all aspects of the Christian life. Whether it is loving, cultivating holy attitudes and feelings, serving, attending to our spiritual life, or living out the faith in a community of brothers and sisters, the body is involved and an important component of living and expressing the holy life.

### *Wesley and Form-giving*

The life consecrated to God has a particular shape: it looks like Christ. Christ-likeness is first of all the work of God in the believer, but it also requires the active response of the believer, as an individual and in community, to inhabit practices that make God’s love visible to others. Wesley gave form to his faith in multiple ways, for instance through his writing, through preaching and teaching, through his ministries on behalf of the poor and the sick, and through organizing his people into societies, classes, and bands. How Wesley shaped Methodism through the formation of societies, classes and band, has been treated frequently in scholarly works. In this section, however, I will focus on one of his other activities, namely publishing.

Wesley was well aware that his time was limited; the activities in which he chose to engage were of great value to him.<sup>33</sup> At a young age, already, he had decided to leave his leisurely pursuits behind and set his heart on holiness.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, he made a resolution on 19 July 1733 to encourage others toward holiness of heart and life, by speaking and by writing—composing, abridging, and translating.<sup>35</sup> In addition to his many other tasks, Wesley chose writing and editing as a way to give form to his faith and to his calling as a minister of the

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<sup>32</sup> Wesley, sermon 98, “On Visiting the Sick,” §I.3, in *Works*, 3:389. See also Manfred Marquandt, “The Altered Attitude toward the Poor,” in *John Wesley’s Social Ethics: Praxis and Principles*, reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 30-32.

<sup>33</sup> Wesley said, “Though I am always in haste, I am never in a hurry; because I never undertake any more work than I can go through with perfect calmness of spirit.” Wesley, Letter to “a member of the society” (December 10, 1777), *Letters*, in *Works* (Jackson), 12:304. Samuel Johnson’s opinion of Wesley was that his “conversation is good, but he is never at leisure. He is always obliged to go at a certain hour. This is very disagreeable to a man who loves to fold his legs and have out his talk, as I do.” James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson: March 19-1776-Dec. 13, 1784*, vol. 2, ed. Roger Ingpen (London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1907), 752.

<sup>34</sup> Wesley, Letter to Samuel Wesley (May 22, 1727?), *Letters I (1921-1739)*, in *Works*, 25:223.

<sup>35</sup> Wesley *Journal* entry of July 19, 1733, quoted in Frank Baker, *John Wesley and the Church of England* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 36. Baker mentions that Wesley had a “wholehearted dedication to [this] divine task.” Frank Baker, “Publishing to the Glory of God: John Wesley as seen in his Writings,” *Historical Bulletin of the World Methodist Historical Society* 11, no. 1 (1982): 2.

Gospel.<sup>36</sup> He published more than 400 works during his lifetime, from the fifty-volume *A Christian Library* to religious posters for evangelism, and many forms of publication in between.<sup>37</sup> Frank Baker estimated that Wesley produced about two thousand editions of his publications, amounting to one and a half to two billion individual copies.<sup>38</sup>

Wesley's particular impetus for publishing may be seen as a spiritual act. He wanted "plain truth for plain people" while he stayed away from "all nice and philosophical speculation, from all perplexed and intricate reasonings and, as far as possible, from even the show of learning."<sup>39</sup> To encourage regular reading, Wesley edited carefully selected texts for "truth, usefulness, clarity, and brevity; he always has in mind the needs of the reader."<sup>40</sup> Wesley's purpose for most of his writing and publishing was to connect practical piety and true knowledge in a manner that made the material accessible to all people in order to edify the people under his care in their striving toward Christian perfection and wholeness.<sup>41</sup> This was true for most of Wesley's publications, whether they were for general knowledge, medical aid, or for spiritual growth. Baker concludes that Wesley was "indirectly both preacher and pastor in all his publications."<sup>42</sup>

Wesley published most of his material in the duodecimo format, about 7.5 by 4.5 inches, which was easy to carry around. He himself read anywhere he could; by publishing small format books, he encouraged reading alongside other activities. He made affordable reading material available for purchase through the Methodist chapels and meeting rooms; books were also sold by Methodist tradespeople and by the itinerant preachers. In his own words, "Two and forty years ago, having a desire to furnish poor people with cheaper, shorter and plainer books than any I had seen, I wrote many small tracts, generally a penny apiece; and afterwards several larger."<sup>43</sup>

Wesley made available what he considered the best spiritual literature because he believed in the power of the written word. He expected the habit of reading of his preachers and

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<sup>36</sup> For a list of works published by John and Charles Wesley, see Frank Baker, *A Union Catalogue of the Publications of Charles and John Wesley*, rev. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stone Mountain, GA: G. Zimmermann, 1991).

<sup>37</sup> Baker, "Publishing to the Glory of God," 2; for evidence of the religious posters, see Frank Baker, "John Wesley: London Publisher, 1733-1791" (annual lecture no. 3, The Friends of Wesley's Chapel, London, May 24, 1984), 6. Baker traces where and how Wesley did much of his writing in the paper "John Wesley at Leisure," *Canadian Methodist Historical Society Papers, 1989*, ed. Neil Semple (Toronto: CMHS Conference, 1990), 23-35. An early biography states that Wesley "reduced many folios and quartos to a pocket volume; ... he abridged some of those volumes on horseback, and others in Inns, or houses, where he staid [sic] but a few days or hours ..." See Thomas Coke and Henry Moore, *The Life of the Rev. John Wesley* (London: G. Paramore, 1792), 481.

<sup>38</sup> Baker, "Publishing to the Glory of God," 2.

<sup>39</sup> Wesley, "The Preface," §3.1, *Sermons I*, in *Works*, 1:104.

<sup>40</sup> Isabel Rivers, "Dissenting and Methodist Books of Practical Divinity," in *Books and their Readers in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Isabel Rivers (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), 153.

<sup>41</sup> Some of Wesley's writings were polemic or apologetic in nature.

<sup>42</sup> Baker, "Publishing to the Glory of God," 3.

<sup>43</sup> Wesley, sermon 87, "The Danger of Riches," §II:7, in *Works*, 3:238.

lay people. The knowledge that was gained in this way, was not to be only an intellectual knowing, but rather “that inward, practical, experimental, feeling knowledge . . .”<sup>44</sup> Reading was, after all, not to be done for its own sake; Wesley chose books so that a disciplined method of reading could bring about transformation in the reader.

By way of extensive writing, abridging, printing, and distributing, Wesley gave shape to his conviction that the Methodists not only needed to hear and respond to the invitation to justification, but they also needed to be formed in their habits and thinking towards sanctification. He greatly multiplied his influence by publishing carefully chosen material. Wesley dedicated considerable amounts of time, money and organized manpower to the publishing venture in order to give shape to holiness of heart and life in his followers.

### *Wesley and Foregrounding*

In order to live out God’s love through embodied practices, the form of one’s faith needs to include the loving of one’s “neighbors,” especially those who are disenfranchised from one’s social environment. This requires an attitude of being willing to see, hear, rub elbows with, and, if need be, physically care for those who are excluded. Noticing another person’s plight, and responding to it, becomes an act of worship, in imitation of God’s acts of lifting up the lowly. As Wesley engaged with people of all walks of life, he noticed their circumstances, and their difficulties. Although he did not often engage social reform at the political level, he was active in rallying resources for the people in the margins: women, the (working) poor, widows and orphans, prisoners, and slaves.<sup>45</sup> Through preaching, writing, begging, and organized relief, Wesley sought to bring attention to the deplorable situations of his fellow human beings. Based on I John 4:19-21, he considered that the Christian is to love the person in need as one “who is daily *presented to his sense*, to raise his esteem, and move his kindness or compassion towards [the brother].”<sup>46</sup>

I will give two vignettes as examples of Wesley’s foregrounding: the micro-financing he instituted for the working poor, and the place of women in the Methodist organization. These will serve to demonstrate that Wesley was moved to love and action for those fellow human beings who were often in the background.

Wesley truly loved the disenfranchised and identified with them, as one equally dependent on God’s grace and provision. Whereas many of the more affluent people considered the poor to be in their position because they were lazy, Wesley called this a “wickedly, devilishly false” assertion.<sup>47</sup> He visited the poor in “their cells underground, others in their garrets, half-starved both with cold and hunger, added to weakness and pain. But I found not one of them

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<sup>44</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Christian’s Pattern* (Wesley’s octavo ed., 1735), xxiv-xxv.

<sup>45</sup> Occasionally Wesley wrote a tract or a letter that appealed to reform at a wider scale, such as “Thoughts on the Scarcity of Provisions” (1773) and “Thoughts upon Slavery” (1778). For more, see Graham Maddox, ed., *John Wesley’s Political Writings* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Wesley, *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*, 4<sup>th</sup> Am. ed. (New York: Abraham Paul, 1818), 665, emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> Wesley, 9-10 February, 1753, *Journal and Diaries III (1743-1754)*, in *Works*, 20:445.

unemployed, who was able to crawl about the room.”<sup>48</sup> Wesley knew the industry of the working poor from close association. In July of 1746, he observed that people were often lacking money to carry on their business.<sup>49</sup> Those who had no friends or family with extra money, and who objected to borrowing from a pawnbroker, had no options. Wesley decided to find a remedy. He went begging for a few days among the rich people all over London and ended up with £ 50. He then put two stewards in charge of this money as a lending stock, or “poor man’s bank.” Every Tuesday morning people could apply for a small loan of up to twenty shillings (£ 1, at the time, the equivalent of one month’s rent), to be repaid in three months by weekly installments.<sup>50</sup> Within the next year more than 250 tradespeople were helped to establish or resume their businesses. Wesley continued to raise money for this ministry; in 1767, the capital amount had increased to £ 120, and in 1772 the maximum lending sum was £ 5.<sup>51</sup>

In a different way, Wesley foregrounded women in his organization by allowing and enabling them to fulfill leadership roles. This is exemplified in the life of Sarah Crosby, who felt compelled to share her experience of justification to a crowd of 200 people: “I ... told them part of what the Lord had done for myself, persuading them to flee from all sin.”<sup>52</sup> Afraid that she might have crossed a line, she wrote Wesley for advice. He replied as follows,

... Hitherto, I think you have not gone too far. You could not well do less. I apprehend all you can do more is, when you meet again, to tell them simply, ‘You lay me under a great difficulty. The Methodists do not allow of women preachers; neither do I take upon me any such character. But I will just nakedly tell you what is in my heart.’ ... I do not see that you have broken any law. Go on calmly and steadily. If you have time, you may read to them the *Notes* on any chapter before you speak a few words, or one of the most awakening sermons, as other women have done long ago.<sup>53</sup>

This was the beginning of Wesley’s acceptance of women preachers, although he did not call them “preachers” until much later. In a letter of 1769, he advised Mrs. Crosby to call her gathering a “prayer meeting”; in 1771 she could make “short observations,” until in 1777, Wesley commented on the injunction against women speaking in church from I Cor. 14 that “[Methodists] allow the rule [that women should not preach]; only we believe it admits of some

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<sup>48</sup> John Telford, *Wesley Anecdotes* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1885), 139-40.

<sup>49</sup> Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists*, §XV.1, in *Works* (Jackson), 8:267.

<sup>50</sup> The lending stock details can be found in Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People called Methodists*, §XV.1, in *Works* (Jackson), 8:267.

<sup>51</sup> See Richard Green “The Foundery Lending Stock,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 3 (1902): 198n2.

<sup>52</sup> Frank Baker, “John Wesley and Sarah Crosby,” *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* 27 (1949-1950): 78.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Baker, “John Wesley and Sarah Crosby,” 79.



exception.”<sup>54</sup> By the end of that year, Sarah Crosby had held 220 public meetings, 600 private meetings and innumerable spiritual conversations.<sup>55</sup>

Sarah Crosby was not alone. Methodist women were active at all levels of the Methodist work: preachers, advisors and counselors, band and class leaders—even of mixed groups, leaders in education at residential, day schools and Sunday schools, visitors of the sick, backsliders and prisoners, as well as supportive ministers’ wives, devoted lay members, and influential benefactors.<sup>56</sup> Wesley gave women opportunities to perform some roles that were usual assigned to men in the late eighteenth century.<sup>57</sup> His optimism of grace provided for women the same spiritual status as for men.<sup>58</sup>

Even if some of his convictions needed time to gather force, Wesley acted upon them. His faith took the form, among other things, of care for the sick, relief for the prisoners, alms for beggars, opportunity for women leaders, schooling for the illiterate, a financial leg-up for struggling business people, and advocacy for the slaves. It was not unusual for people to be engaged in charity, but Wesley’s acts of mercy were an embodiment of his beliefs in such a way that he saw and felt the predicament of the less fortunate. Analogous to looking carefully at the background of a painting, Wesley was moved to notice the people in the background and lift them up, until they were in the foreground of his life and ministry.

### *Wesley and Paying Attention*

How is one to show evidence that someone was engaged in the practice of paying attention? As important as being attentive, reflecting and contemplating are for spiritual transformation, those activities can be quite imperceptible in the life of a man of constant activity like Wesley. However, three characteristics may be traced in Wesley’s life and work that indicate his habit of paying attention: the observations and reflections which he noted in his correspondence and journals; his power of integrating knowledge and experience; and the significance he accorded to experiences.

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<sup>54</sup> Wesley wrote this to distinguish the Methodists from the Quakers, who recognized the right of women to speak under “immediate inspiration,” indicating a more occasional call to preach, the “Quaker” call. Wesley viewed the call to preach as a long-term calling.

<sup>55</sup> Baker, “John Wesley and Sarah Crosby,” 79.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Earl Kent Brown, *Women of Mr. Wesley’s Methodism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983).

<sup>57</sup> Wesley’s attitude toward women was ambivalent; it was in some circumstances enlightened, and at other times it showed the reigning outlook of his time. See Diane Cunningham Leclerc, “Wesley’s Ambivalence Toward Women,” in “Original Sin and Sexual Difference: A Feminist Historical Theology of a Patristic, Wesleyan, and Holiness Doctrine” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1998), 113-30.

<sup>58</sup> Diane Leclerc asserts that Wesley came to see the social equality of women as part of the healing of the *imago Dei* after the fall. See Diane Leclerc, *Singleness of Heart: Gender, Sin, and Holiness in Historical Perspective* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 2001), 151.

Wesley kept an extensive correspondence in which he shared his contemplations and advice on many topics.<sup>59</sup> Ted Campbell avers that, “the careful examination of one’s own experience was a critical component of the Christian life as Wesley taught it,” and in the private letters, spiritual subjects “are laced with indications of Wesley’s innermost thoughts and affections.”<sup>60</sup> Even with the increase of duties and responsibilities, Wesley continued to write letters throughout his life. Interestingly, the letters to women “display an intensity of attention plainly lacking in his more administrative correspondence with his male preachers.”<sup>61</sup> Wesley served as spiritual director to many of his correspondents, but he also paid meticulous attention to the physical circumstances of his correspondents’ lives.<sup>62</sup>

Another form of deliberative reflection occurred in Wesley’s *Journals*. These publications were not straightforward autobiographical records. Rather, the journals were judiciously chosen extracts from the diaries Wesley kept from 1725, when he was 22, until six days before his death in 1791.<sup>63</sup> Periodically, he transcribed the terse recordings of the diaries into various spiritual writings; some journals were meant for family and friends, some for the societies, and some were written for publication.<sup>64</sup> Nehemiah Curnock surmises that “he thus wrote and rewrote for the clearing of his own mind, that he might see his life in black and white, and so be in a position to judge accurately as to his own motives, attainments, doings, failures.”<sup>65</sup> In Wesley’s published *Journals*, we have, therefore, descriptions of people, events and encounters, as well as thoughts and opinions, all carefully selected from what he considered important enough to record in his diaries with “here and there such little reflections as occurred to my mind.”<sup>66</sup> He also added deliberations on the significance of these occurrences. Through the exercise of transcribing his diaries into a public record, Wesley contemplated the information for their value and impact as published *Journal*. This is especially evidenced by the time he took between the period covered by the diary and the publication of the *Journal*—at least two years, sometimes as long as six years; this gave Wesley the opportunity to have a better perspective on events, and to edit the *Journals* with hindsight.<sup>67</sup>

Another way to show how Wesley paid attention is to focus on Wesley’s consideration of his own and others’ experiences. Wesley put a premium on experience and that meant that he paid careful attention to it, whether it was in the spiritual realm, including even some of the

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<sup>59</sup> Ted A. Campbell, “John Wesley as Diarist and Correspondent,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 130. It is estimated that Wesley wrote almost 18,000 letters, of which about twenty percent has been preserved.

<sup>60</sup> Campbell, “John Wesley as Diarist,” 129, 133.

<sup>61</sup> Leclerc, “Original Sin and Sexual Difference,” 101.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-110, with particular emphasis on Wesley’s correspondence with women.

<sup>63</sup> See the last entry in Wesley’s Diary on Wednesday February 23, 1791, in *Journal* (Curnock), vol. 8, 128.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, 36.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Wesley, “Preface,” *Journals I*, §1, in *Works*, 18:121.

<sup>67</sup> Only the second and the last volume were published within two years of the last diary date. Baker, “The Birth of John Wesley’s Journal,” 25-26, 31.

mystics,<sup>68</sup> in the physical sphere,<sup>69</sup> or in the area of scientific knowledge, such as his medical practice.<sup>70</sup> In his pastoral role, Wesley often drew from his personal experience.<sup>71</sup> The evidence of experience could even cause Wesley to change theological positions. An example is found in his conversation with Peter Böhler: “I was forced to retreat to my last hold, ‘that experience would never agree with the literal interpretation of those scriptures. Nor could I therefore allow it to be true till I found some living witnesses of it.’ [Böhler] replied, he could show men such at any time.”<sup>72</sup> Böhler did as he said, and this prepared the way for Wesley’s own experience of justification by faith. A second instance can be found in the section “Two Works of Grace” in *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, where Wesley inserts a footnote seven times, qualifying his earlier statements with experiences from people’s lives.<sup>73</sup>

It has been argued that Wesley used experience as a source of spiritual knowledge or as a test to the interpretation of Scripture.<sup>74</sup> However, I conclude that Wesley’s use of experience is much more holistic, as he reflected on knowledge gained from all of human life, in light of his own and other people’s experiences. He integrated experience into a holistic approach to knowledge, which underscores the significance he attached to experience.

### *Wesley and Holding in Tension*

The capacity to hold two or more concepts or aspects of ideas in tension is fertile in different ways. It allows for mystery, and it can exhibit a hospitality in thinking, which makes it easier to build bridges between people. Moreover, in the space between two or more notions, new meaning may arise. Wesley’s practical theology of holy love is characterized by a number of dialectical pairs. From his upbringing, he learned to balance high churchmanship and pietistic inclinations. In preparation for the priesthood in the Church of England, Wesley embraced the Anglican *via media* between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.<sup>75</sup> Not only did he inherit a tendency to operate in the midst of opposites from his family and his tradition, but also in the development of his own theological emphasis, where “conjunctive pairs” abound: “faith, works;

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<sup>68</sup> See John E. Griswold, “Mystics and the Authority of Experience in John Wesley’s Theology” (ThD diss., Boston University School of Theology, 1999), especially 81, 83.

<sup>69</sup> E.g. “[God] gave thee, together with thy other senses, those grand avenues of knowledge, sight and hearing: Were these employed to those excellent purposes for which they were bestowed upon thee? In bringing thee in more and more instruction in righteousness and true holiness?” Wesley, sermon 51, “The Good Steward,” §III.4, in *Works*, 2:294.

<sup>70</sup> See, for instance, Deborah Madden, “The Limitation of Human Knowledge: Faith and the Empirical Method in John Wesley’s Medical Holism.” *History of European Ideas* 32 (2006): 164.

<sup>71</sup> “[Wesley’s] power to help his friends in their perplexities was drawn largely from his own experience.” John Telford, “Introduction” in *The Letters of John Wesley*, ed. John Telford (London: Epworth Press, 1931), vol. 1, xxii; hereafter cited as *Letters* (Telford).

<sup>72</sup> Yoshio Noro, “Wesley’s Theological Epistemology,” *The Iliff Review* 28 (1971): 59-76.

<sup>73</sup> See, for instance, Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, §27, in *Works*, 13:151, emphasis in original.

<sup>74</sup> Albert C. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 16-17; Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley’s Practical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 46.

<sup>75</sup> Albert C. Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), iv.

personal devotions, sacramental practice; personal piety, social concern; justification, sanctification; evangelism, Christian nurture; Bible, tradition; revelation, reason; commitment, civility; creation, redemption; cell group, institutional church; local scene, world parish.”<sup>76</sup> Sometimes Wesley walked a fine middle line between two extremes, for instance in the way his theology avoided the rationalism of the Deists and the experientialism of the mystics.<sup>77</sup> At other times, the central stance between two positions indicated a harmonizing or a synthesis, such as his doctrine of entire sanctification which bridged Roman Catholic and Protestant views.<sup>78</sup> And sometimes Wesley lived within the uneasy tension of two situations that seem inconsistent, for example the fact that he stayed within the Church of England until his death, while allowing himself “in cases of necessity” to vary from the principles of the Church of England.<sup>79</sup>

Nor did Wesley juggle just two sides. From one perspective it can be said that he integrated *three* elements within his theology: the dynamic understanding from Eastern theology of how God’s will and human will interact; the Protestant emphasis on *sola fide* and *sola Scriptura*; and the importance of the affections, learned from his Moravian friends.<sup>80</sup> Another three-way correlation in Wesley is the Anglican trend of bridging science and philosophy with theology, which is amply evidenced in his scientific writings.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, with respect to authoritative sources for of faith, Wesley held *four*: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Even though Scripture was preeminent, he carefully incorporated the other three to avoid extremes in any direction.<sup>82</sup> All of these examples illustrate how Wesley’s theology emerged as distinctive, although imitating the early church, and akin to certain parts of other traditions.

Besides the connected tensions in his theology, Wesley’s life and work evidenced other strains, in part due to the era in which he lived. A consistent tension existed, for instance, in Wesley’s dealing with the rich and the poor: he focused on serving those in need, while befriending the wealthy who would contribute to his ministries. A further example is his medical writing, in which he balanced experience and the common good, the “rational and emotional,

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<sup>76</sup> William J. Abrahams, *The Coming Great Revival: Recovering the Full Evangelical Tradition* (San Francisco: Harper & Breaux, 1984), 67.

<sup>77</sup> Mark L. Weeter, *John Wesley’s views and use of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 241-42.

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance, Collins’s chart of how Wesley bridges Catholic and Protestant views of entire sanctification in Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 292.

<sup>79</sup> For Wesley’s own words on the matter, see sermon 115, “Prophets and Priests [The Ministerial Office],” §16, in *Works*, 4:80.

<sup>80</sup> Outler, *John Wesley*, 14.

<sup>81</sup> Madden, “The Limitation of Human Knowledge,” 164; Deborah Madden, “Medicine and Moral Reform: The Place of Practical Piety in John Wesley’s Art of Physic,” *The American Society of Church History* 73, no. 4 (December 2004): 742. Richard Riss concludes, “There was a holistic balance to [Wesley’s] theology [with natural philosophy and philosophy] which avoided many of the pitfalls of his contemporaries.” See Richard Michael Riss, “John Wesley’s Reactions to the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755” (PhD diss., Drew University, 2007), 116.

<sup>82</sup> Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in Wesley,” 7-18. To consider experience a valid source of knowledge and authority was Wesley’s unique contribution to the Anglican trilateral of Scripture, tradition, and reason.

idealist and pragmatic, scholarly and populist . . .”<sup>83</sup> In that particular field, Wesley “personifies the tensions and contradictions of that time.”<sup>84</sup> Yet another area is Wesley’s influence through publishing. With the enormous output of his writings and abridgments, Wesley can be considered a “cultural middleman,” as he mediated between the educated upper-class and the less educated and illiterate lower-class.<sup>85</sup> Let these examples suffice to underscore how prevalent it was for Wesley to hold several concepts or sides of an issue that seem to be in opposition or at least existed uneasily side-by-side.

The tension between the contrasts mentioned so far was not necessarily a negative situation of pushing and pulling, of anxiety, or of indecision. Rather, the holding of two or more features caused Wesley’s theology and ministry to be dynamic, vital and relevant for how people lived out their faith. In short, “Wesley’s significance as a theologian rests fundamentally on his ability to hold together elements in the Christian tradition that generally are pulled apart and expressed in isolation. Thus, he integrated contrasting emphases that are vital to a healthy and comprehensive vision of the Christian faith.”<sup>86</sup>

Wesley’s characteristic of holding two or more concepts, practices, or facets of an idea together in tension, provided a broadness in his thinking. On this basis he could say, “There are many doctrines of a less essential nature, with regard to which even the sincere children of God (such is the present weakness of human understanding) are and have been divided for many ages. In these we may think and let think; we may ‘agree to disagree.’”<sup>87</sup> And also, “Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart . . .? If it be, give me thine hand.”<sup>88</sup>

### *Wesley’s Aesthetic Practical Theology*

A close look at the intersection of what Wesley said he believed and what he did, shows features of engaged aesthetics. Wesley did not develop his theology from an aesthetic point of view, nor did he think systematically in a theological manner about the art and beauty he encountered. Nevertheless, Wesley’s practical theology can be called aesthetic because of the way in which he practiced his beliefs and how his practices expressed his theology: acknowledging the embodiment of faith; giving form to his faith through his habits, his ministries—such as writing, editing, and publishing—and his organization of the Methodists; while he was perceptive of, and responsive to, people who were marginalized in that time—women, the poor, the sick, prisoners, and slaves. Wesley’s writings show that he paid attention to his own and others’ experiences, incorporating that knowledge in his theology and practices.

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<sup>83</sup> Deborah Madden, “Experience and the Common Interest of Mankind: The Enlightened Empiricism of John Wesley’s *Primitive Physick*,” *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 26 (2003): 42; Deborah Madden, “Wesley as Advisor on Health and Healing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, ed. Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 182.

<sup>84</sup> Madden, “Experience and the Common Interest of Mankind,” 42.

<sup>85</sup> Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 351-52.

<sup>86</sup> Abrahams, *The Coming Great Revival*, 67.

<sup>87</sup> Wesley, sermon 53, “On the Death of the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield,” §III.1, in *Works*, 2:341.

<sup>88</sup> Wesley, sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” §5, 2:82, quoting from 2 Kings 10:15.

Finally, in his theology and work, Wesley consistently held in tension two or more aspects or positions, which resulted in a vital faith and dynamic approach to ministry.

As inheritors of Wesley's theology, we would do well to approach our faith and our faith practices through the lens of engaged aesthetics in order to cultivate a more holistic experience and expression of the life of Christ in us as individuals and as communities. Engaged aesthetics encourages us to be more intentional about living out our faith in our everyday life, and about our habits and the way we treat our own and others' physical existence, as well as the environment. It challenges us to purposefully give form to our faith through habits, lifestyles and ministries that 'incarnate' Christ. It charges us to 'see' others who are in any way different, and to welcome them hospitably and honorably, as those who God lifts up. It invites us to reflect more deeply and together with others, on our lives, our knowledge, our experiences, and to be open to the contribution of others that can enrich us beyond what we can imagine. It also summons us to take risks with mystery, suspend our judgment, and be willing to be changed for the sake of the Kingdom of God.