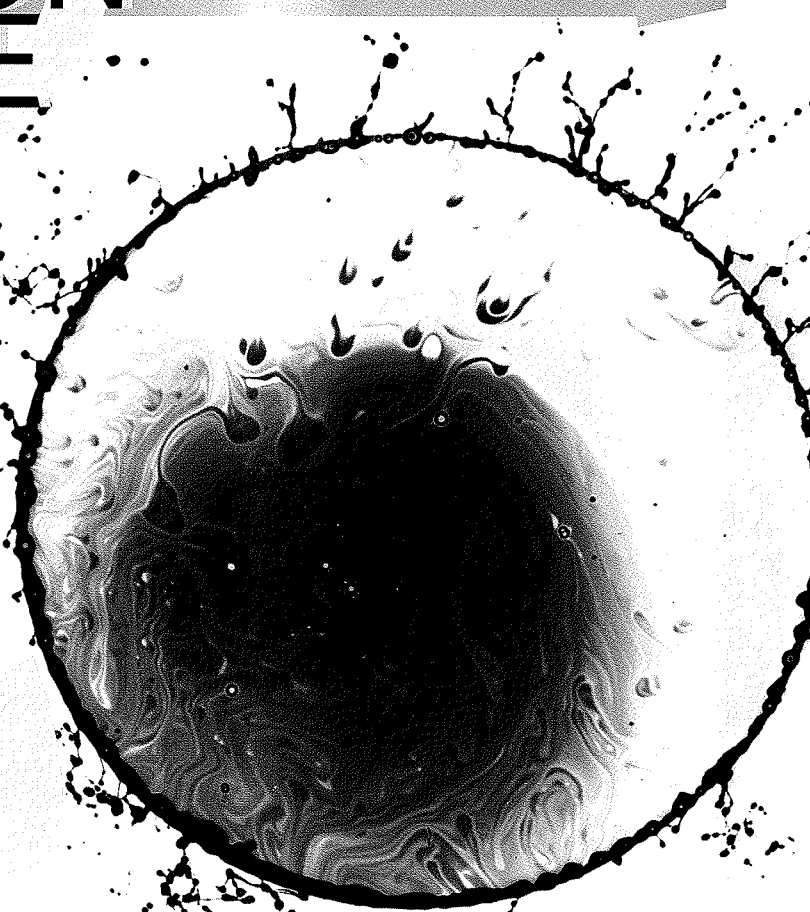


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VOCATION AND THE ARTIST



*Light of those whose dreary dwelling
 Borders on the shades of death,
 Come and by thy love's revealing,
 Dissipate the clouds beneath:
 The new heaven and earth's Creator,
 In our deepest darkness rise,
 Scattering all the night of nature,
 Pouring eye-sight on our eyes.*

-Charles Wesley, from Hymn 11, *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord*

EXPLORING THE VOCATION OF THE WESLEYAN ARTIST

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As a lifelong United Methodist and artist I have wondered how my calling as an artist fit into my theological heritage. While many Protestant seminaries have begun to re-engage the visual arts, most are of the Reformed tradition. As an Asbury Theological Seminary student with a Master's thesis topic deadline quickly approaching, I began searching out an "aesthetic doorway" into Wesleyan theology, leading to research on the hymnology of Charles Wesley.

Though John and Charles Wesley worked in tandem theologically, my project came to focus on Charles Wesley. Charles had an astute ability to convey sound theology through his hymns. Thus he provided a more stable bridge between written theology and aesthetics. His creative methodology was particularly suited to communicating the more "affective" side of the Christian faith, while not in any way neglecting the fundamental intellectual doctrines of Wesleyan theology. Charles Wesley's creative methods of "doing theology" through hymn-writing seemed to provide a fitting lens through which one might begin to look at the arts from a Wesleyan perspective. The goal of this project was to do just that. A written thesis served as a summary of findings in textual form, while a collection of paintings shown at Asbury College served as the project's culmination.

I approached the subject through an examination of five collections of Charles Wesley's hymns, specifically those correlating to different seasons of the church year (and different seasons of Christ's life). These

served as primary sources in both the written thesis and the corresponding body of paintings.¹ I particularly sought out hymns that used verbs relating to sight ("see," "behold," "view," etc.) in order to get at explicit understanding of the visual in the hymns. In fact, a preliminary read of Wesley's hymns reveals he often used the visual imperative to call the worshipper to "see" different aspects of belief.

After detailed look at "sight" verbs in Wesley's hymns, I moved forward to engage two theologians of different denominational backgrounds—Bill Dyrness of largely Reformed background and Jacques Maritain, a Catholic. Both of these theologians have written extensively on theological aesthetics, and an examination of their writings was meant to serve as a springboard for discovering a distinctively Wesleyan aesthetic. For brevity I will primarily recount the contrasts I discovered as I looked at Wesleyan theology through Charles Wesley's hymns and then at the theological writings of the above-mentioned theologians.

Asbury Theological Seminary is a leading Wesleyan institution, "Where head and heart go hand in hand."² I was reminded of this statement as I began to explore what made up a Wesleyan aesthetic. Wesleyans, ideally, have a balanced faith—one valuing both logical thought and emotive experience. In fact, the Wesleyan quadrilateral supports the balance of Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience. This acknowledgment of experience as theological method is perhaps the most evident distinction between a Wesleyan look at aesthetics and other theological approaches.

John Tyson, in a recent article for the *Asbury Journal*, explored the concept of experience in Wesleyan theology. Historians and theologians have of late called Charles Wesley an "experimental" theologian, placing him in a distinct but quite valid category of theologians. Tyson quotes J. Earnest Rattenbury as having placed Charles Wesley outside the category of "conventional theologians," explaining, "Charles Wesley was indeed a theologian who created, crafted, and communicated theological doctrines—in a creative and more original medium than 'formal theologians' do."³

Tyson continues the article, similarly to this study, by examining the uses of particular "experience" words in Wesley's hymns. The words he selects for his study are *feel/felt*, *prove*, *know*, and *taste*. This selection of words is based largely on the particularly Wesleyan doctrine of assurance of salvation. Both John and Charles had felt experiences and were assured of their salvation. In fact, John Wesley considered this essential to being a "real Christian." John, though a bit more straightforward in his presentation of theology, fully affirmed his brother's theological methods as "experimental and practical divinity" (see specifically

A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodist). Tyson goes on to further affirm that the fact that John Wesley would call something as practical as a book of hymns "a body of experimental and practical divinity" is a testament to the kind of theologians the Wesleys were, and the faith of the Methodists. *Praxis* was clearly as important in the development and embodiment of Wesleyan theology as an examination of Wesleyan hymnody reveals. Wesley not only commanded worshippers to "see," he also unabashedly brought them into the experience of seeing. He painted a picture with words.

In this sense, Charles Wesley's theological method in regard to aesthetics takes a very different avenue than theologians Dyrness or Maritain. Though the Wesleys seldom, if ever, tackled the topic of theological aesthetics in a formal discussion, Charles Wesley indeed practiced a theology of aesthetics in his theological method. His method is, in itself, aesthetic. In this sense, Charles Wesley is perhaps our best model of a Wesleyan artistic calling.

Whereas Dyrness' methodology is Biblical and systematic in nature, and Maritain's is strongly based in philosophical training,⁵ Wesley's is rooted in a balance of reason, an understanding of the Bible, and an appreciation of *experience*—particularly the experiences of salvation and sanctification. The prominence of these themes in Wesley's hymns links him with Dyrness and Maritain in the area of Creation and New Creation, though much more personally than either of the two. In many ways, the differences between the three are there because both Dyrness and Maritain had the explicit task of aesthetics in mind, while Charles Wesley was just "doing what he did." In fact, hymn writing was such a major part of Wesley's life that he measured his well being by whether or not he was able to write a hymn on a given day.⁶

While Dyrness has suggested three major categories, or "starting points" for theological aesthetics, Wesley does not necessarily *start* at any of these (Incarnation, Trinity, Creation and New Creation), but encapsulates all of them in the hymns that he wrote. In my vision word study, I noted the role of paradox. An example is when the Holy Spirit's role in human vision becomes an important theme. There is a paradox throughout the hymns of believers' being commanded to "see the blood applied" but needing the blood's application through the Spirit to even see at all. Particularly in *Hymns on the Ascension and Hymns for Whitsunday*, we are able to note a shift from physical seeing to seeing through eyes of faith. Logically, because Jesus is no longer with us physically, the Spirit is sent to aid in vision. As the Spirit aids believers, sanctification, or New Creation,

occurs. Each of these three themes is a part of the experiential story that Wesley unfurls in these hymn collections.

Another notable theological theme is Wesley's view of the sacraments. In *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, we see the Spirit indwelling the sacraments in order that they may become "lenses" to see Christ embodied every time Christians practice this meal together. In this way, we can understand that the Wesleys understood the practice of Communion as more than simple response or remembrance. Reformed theologians typically view the sacraments as a commemoration of sorts because Christ's physical body is already in heaven. The believer is mystically drawn upward into the heavenliness to experience Christ. For a Wesleyan theologian Communion is less about spatial categories than belief in Christ's power in the elements. The Wesleyan theologian is less concerned about where Christ is at present, than that he is present that believers might *experience* him *now*. The elements become a sort of portal to the power of Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, the sacraments become windows to transcendence. While Reformed theologians might view the arts as "response," Wesleyans might view the arts as "windows."

A prominent similarity between Wesley and theologians such as Dyrness, however, is the emphasis on worship as a key to aesthetic understanding. While Dyrness prefaces his entire book with the importance of worship as a framework, Charles Wesley's theology is based entirely in the composition of lyrics for worship. Tyson refers to a statement by theologian Teresa Berger:

In Berger's view, Charles Wesley's theology and his role as a theologian are best viewed from the standpoint of theology as doxology. This means, in part, that theological affirmations (made in acts of praise) to God, are every bit as effective and theologically significant as are those more studied statements about God. In fact...this is a particularly apt approach for understanding Wesleyan theology.⁷

The balance between reason and experience largely has been the base of Methodist worship. Over the years, as Methodist worship has developed, Methodists have been known for living in the tension between form and freedom—the form of Anglican and Catholic roots; and the freedom of early Pietistic and Holiness movements in the American frontier.

This balance is a microcosm of the layers of balance in Wesleyan theology at large. In his sermons and journals, John Wesley is masterful in his balance of major theological premises, similar in some ways to the balance discovered in theologian and philosopher Jacques Maritain's philosophical concepts. Maritain's emphasis on grace as a means of reconciling morality and arts echoes the ways in which Wesley's hymns portray our need for the Holy Spirit as a reconciling and eye-opening agent. As Maritain seeks to balance morality and the arts, Wesley seeks to balance form and freedom, law and gospel, and other theological axioms. Kenneth Collins, in *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology*, writes:

The sophisticated theological synthesis that Wesley painstakingly crafted throughout his career held together, without contradiction, law and gospel, faith and holy living, grace and works, grace as both favor and empowerment, justification and sanctification, instantaneous and process, the universality of grace (prevenient) and its

Wesley not only commanded worshippers to "see,"

limited (saving) actualization, divine initiative and human response, as well as initial and final justification. Wesley's theology then was, in reality, a "conjunctive" theology.⁸

This "conjunctive" theology mirrors Maritain's attempts at synthesizing the paradox of "doing" and "being" as central to the artist's task. It is the "seer's" responsibility to create, while ultimately it is the Spirit's responsibility to enable sight, as Wesley's hymns reveal.

How can understanding of this balance lend itself to a *practical* Wesleyan aesthetic? How would an artist or minister know if he or she had created something aesthetically Wesleyan?

From the above discussion we can assume a few overarching themes within a Wesleyan aesthetic. A Wesleyan aesthetic must have its roots in the *experiences* of salvation and sanctification; it must note the paradox of the Incarnation and the importance of the Holy Spirit's work in our ability to see rightly. A Wesleyan aesthetic suggests artistic expression as a window into the saving and sanctifying power of Christ and as a rightful means of theology and doxology. As one discovers in looking at Charles Wesley's hymns, *seeing* stirs affections and leads to action.

Wesleyan artists must view their work with a particular sense of mission in our increasingly pragmatic and visual culture. Charles Wesley's hymns offer the power of affective experience, which pragmatists and seekers long for in their searches. The benefit of a Wesleyan aesthetic, though, is its balance between such experience and the truth presented therein. Charles Wesley's hymns are not full of empty emotion; but rather of true touch, holy taste, and life-giving vision. This particular combination, not of theology and the arts, but of theology through the arts is what Wesleyan artists promise to offer today.

This article is taken from the author's Master's thesis, "Visual Hymnology: An Exploration of Theological Aesthetics Through the Hymns of Charles Wesley," Asbury Theological Seminary, May 2007.

¹ Specifically, the five collection of hymns are *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord*, *Hymns on the Lord's Supper*, *Hymns for Our Lord's Resurrection*, *Hymns for Ascension-Day*, and *Hymns for Whitsunday*.

² Motto of Asbury Theological Seminary.

³ John R Tyson "Charles Wesley and the Language of Evangelical Experience: The Poetical Hermeneutic Revisited." *The Asbury Journal* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2006), 26.

⁴ Tyson, 27.

⁵ William A. Dyrness. *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001; Jacques Maritain. *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*. North Stratford, New Hampshire: Ayer, 2001; Jacques Maritain. *The Responsibility of the Artist*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960.

⁶ Tyson, 27.

⁷ Tyson, 26.

⁸ Kenneth J. Collins. *The Scripture Way of Salvation: The Heart of John Wesley's Theology*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997, 207.

⁹ The symbolism of the winepress recalls the common practice of stomping grapes to make wine in Christ's day. The word also references the crucifixion and our practice of the Lord's Supper throughout the history of the church.



*Who is this, that comes from far
Clad in garments dipt in blood!
Strong triumphant Traveller,
Is he man, or is he God?*

*I that speak in righteousness,
Son of God and man I am,
Mighty to redeem your race;
Jesus is your Saviour's name.*

*Wherefore are thy garments red,
Died as in a crimson sea?
They that in the wine-fat tread
Are not stain'd so much as Thee.*

*I the Father's fav'rite Son,
Have the dreadful Wine-press¹⁰ trod,
Borne the vengeful wrath alone,
All the fiercest wrath of God.*