

Reforming a theology of the body: Susanna Wesley in dialogue with Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel

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Susanna Wesley's writings are intricate and complex as they illustrate a theology of embodiment stemming from the Incarnation. Her meditations and journal entries reveal a spirituality of the body, a contribution in the history of Methodism that has been undervalued. This paper places Susanna Wesley (1669–1742) in dialogue with theologian, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel (1926–2016), on the subject of embodiment. Susanna Wesley was on a continuum of change as she moved from strict societal constraints and ecclesial expectations of women in the late 17th and 18th centuries to an enlarged view of humankind. She expressed this movement as “becoming a lover of oneself.” The self-possession with which she opposed the views of her forceful father, Dr. Annesley, is noteworthy for a young girl not quite thirteen. Dr. Annesley was a leader of the Dissenting cause, which found fault with the dominant Church of England. Susanna, against her father's wishes, adhered to the Church of England!

Speaking of embodiment as the beginning and end of all God's works, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel develops the reality of “thinking with the body,” especially from the viewpoint of violated bodies. This paper illustrates a reforming from the 17th to the 21st century using the rubric of a theology of the body. This movement leads not only to self-actualization, but the embrace of human beings in their totality and the redemption of ecclesial practice.

Introduction

As the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation is celebrated, we hear little mention of the foremothers of the Reformation such as Susanna Wesley. Yet I shall argue that Susannah Wesley is an important figure in the ongoing process of reform that the church has undergone for the last five centuries. Her para-feminist insights foreshadow the theology of embodiment advanced by feminist Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel nearly four hundred years

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later.¹ By placing Susanna Wesley and Moltmann-Wendell in dialogue I represent them as points on a continuum of change. In so doing I hope to highlight Wesley's contribution to the history of Christian theology. According to Rev. Alfred T. Day, III, General Commission on Archives and History: “... the differences she made have lived on because of the sons that she raised.”² I shall maintain that the differences she made live on because of who she was.

1 This term comes from the Latin *parare*, meaning “making ready”. The term, which I am using as a qualifier to the noun feminist, connotes a forerunner, herald, harbinger, or precursor to a movement that was termed feminism.

2 Transcript of a video produced by United Methodist Communications (Nashville, 2016) titled “Susanna Wes-





The poetry of one of her sons, Samuel, was representative of the prevailing mindset of Susanna's England. The "war of the sexes" will always be won by men, according to Samuel Wesley, Jr., in his allegory, *The Plain of Life* (all poetry excerpts are from Wesley Jr. 1736, 22ff). On the field or plain of battle, "Wisest God" has ordained that man shall always rule over woman. Each has superior merit, but man rules by "Right Divine." (See below)

II

With Words his long-disputed Cause he [Man] tries,
But Woman's equal wit disdains to yield;
At length to Arms ungenerously he flies,
As quick the Female takes the proffered Field;
Each their superior Merit to maintain:
For Man was learned and proud, and Woman fair
and vain.

XLV

Tho' Man shall awful Rule o'er Woman bear,
Not sprung from greater Worth, but Right Divine;
Yet she shall in her Turn Dominion share.
E'er to his Will her Empire she resign.

L

Still will each Sex for Sovereignty contend:
War with the World begun,
With that alone shall end.

XLII

For Heav'n made Man to win, and Woman to be
won.

XXVII

Marriage, and Love; unhappy when disjoined;
Who over Lust the surest Triumph gained;
Friends to Religion firm, by Wisest God ordained.

These poems written by Samuel Wesley, Jr., first-born son to Susanna and her husband, Samuel Sr., reflects a mindset in the 18th century that men were to rule women from a "Right Divine." Further, women were vain and sensual creatures, sometimes compared to "vessels" of procreation. According to theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Christianity was imprinted with the Greco-Roman view of the dualism of mind and body, with man associated with mind/spirit and woman with body/nature/sensuality. With the

devaluation of the body, women were also undervalued (Moltmann-Wendel 1994, 42).

In *I Am My Body: New Ways of Embodiment*, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel presents the centrality of the body in Jesus' message and in Christianity's affinity to the suffering body. God incarnated was scandalous in the religions of the ancient world and inconveniently a challenge to present reality (Moltmann-Wendel 1994, 103–105). For Moltmann-Wendel, *embodiment* is the beginning and end of all God's works (Ibid, 105). Embodiment refers to a self that experiences selfhood and relationships through a multi-dimensional body. It is knowing that your body belongs to you. It makes up your person so that you can say, "I am I" (Ibid, xi). Embodiment "recognizes God in many human experiences which remind us that life begins in the mother's body, that it begins as a twosome, not alone, and that our bodily life represents God's life on this earth" (Ibid). This research brings the observations of Moltmann-Wendel regarding embodiment or an embodied theology into dialogue with the meditations of Susanna Wesley. Some of the meditations of Susanna Wesley were among the private papers of John Wesley and bequeathed to Dr. Coke, John Whitehead, and Henry Moore (Doughty 1984, 58).³ Unfortunately, these papers passed into the hands of John Pawson, who destroyed some of them of which he disapproved (Ibid)! This research article draws from the surviving meditations or journal entries.⁴

Susanna Wesley's life and writings illustrate some of the concepts of Moltmann-Wendel, all of which augment the word "embodiment." Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel's concepts are as follows:

- 1) Becoming one's own person (in Susanna Wesley's words, "a lover of [oneself]")⁵—Moltmann-Wendel develops the life-giving contact between Jesus

3 W.L.Doughty traces this trajectory of the *Meditations*, which were among the private papers of John Wesley, son of Susanna. Susanna lived with John at his London headquarters, The Foundery, before she died in 1742.

4 This article uses the primary sources in *Susanna Wesley: The Complete Writings*, ed. Charles Wallace Jr., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

5 Susanna also wrote to son Samuel Wesley, Jr: "The first thing that seems dictated by nature's law is self-preservation. I know that Christians generally hold that the glory of God and increase of [his] kingdom should be first in our desires and designs. And in order to it we should chiefly aim at being virtuous and religious. But forasmuch as virtuous life presupposes life, I think the first thing nature teaches us is the care of our life and to avoid

ley, Mother of Methodism." www.umc.org/who-we-are/susanna-wesley-mother-of-methodism. Susanna's sons John and Charles initiated the revival movement in the Church of England that became Methodist Christianity.

and the bleeding woman in Mark 14. Jesus charges her to go in wholeness or shalom. This belongs to her and makes up her person. It surrounds her with physical peace so that she can be sure that “you are yourself. ‘I am I.’ Liberation takes place in the body” (Ibid, xi). The body becomes the hinge of personality. (Ibid, 20).

- 2) Recalling the distinctive feature of Christianity, i.e., God became body—Moltmann-Wendel recalls the history of the mind-body dualism in the Greco-Roman tradition. Christianity became imprinted with this dichotomy. Man was associated with spirit and woman with body, sensuality, nature. With the devaluation of the body, woman was devalued. (Ibid, 42)
- 3) Demonstrating woman’s “other fertility” or her spirituality and creativity of mind and soul—“Women belong to themselves, and this ‘other fertility’ can become the beginning of their own lives.” (Ibid, 29)
- 4) Emphasizing woman’s propagation of Jesus’ *familia dei*, which is the starting point of a new female life-style—Moltmann-Wendel recalls that all life began as a twosome (mother-child). Autonomy is not enough; we all need to be in relationships. The *familia dei* has the power to nurture this need for relationships (Ibid, 23)
- 5) “Thinking with the body.” (Ibid, 85) –Feeling, sensing, intuition, sensuality are “the media of experience and knowledge.” (Ibid, 86) This epistemology opens us to new truths.

Both Susanna Wesley and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel articulate a theology stemming from the Incarnation: God became flesh (in the body of a woman). This theological perspective not only contributes to epistemology and to the embodiment of spirituality, but it undergirds ecclesial practices in pastoral care, especially in ministry to violated bodies

E. Moltmann-Wendel asserts, “In male culture women were always associated with sensuality, the body, empathy – niches which were allowed them but which today, in parallel to some male thinkers, they are filling with new meaning” (Moltmann-Wendel 1994, 87). This analysis was certainly descriptive of the mindset of the 17th and early 18th century in which Susanna Wesley lived. In the poems of Samu-

el Wesley, Jr., we see an example of this sensuality associated with women:

XIII

Artful her Bosom heaved, her rolling Eyes
Allured with Glances whom in Heart she
succumbed;
Sweet flowed her Words with ever-pleasing Lies,
An Infant Lisp her double Tongue adored.
Her Feet half dancing, negligently paced;
Her Motion, nay, her Rest was all Design
Her Arms a Scarf, and Ribbon Bridle graced,
Whose Colors glorious in the Sun-beams Shine;
Their Hue still varying with the changing Place,
Yet each alternate Dye was suited to her Face.

However, in contrast to this emphasis on the sensuality of woman’s body, the meditations of Susanna Wesley illustrate her *spirituality of the body*, a contribution in the history of Methodism that historians often miss. In fact, with historical spotlights turned on Charles and John Wesley, two of Susanna’s nineteen children, much has been overlooked in the study of that which is explicitly Wesleyan. This paper takes another look at a theology of the body stemming from the Incarnation and does so from the meditations and other writings of the neglected Wesley.

In what follows, I juxtapose meditations from Susanna’s journals with Moltmann-Wendel’s five concepts (above). I do this in order to demonstrate the ways in which Susanna’s insights foreshadow Moltmann-Wendel’s theology of embodiment. Susanna certainly did not have a full fledged feminist theology that explicitly challenged 17th and 18th century gender roles. The evolvment of change unfolds in time in much more of a cylindrical movement than a linear one.⁶ It is not my intent to place Susanna Wesley at the end of the continuum of change that has occurred in feminism. Thus, it is not my intent to re-invent her, rather to position her on the vast spectrum of transtheoretical change that preceded the modern feminist movement. However, we would do well to realize how Susanna Wesley positioned us to contend with the sovereignty of Man over Woman and to move toward equal worth. I argue that we can see her as a para-feminist by show-

all penury or want of those things that sustain and preserve it.” “Dear Sammy” in Wallace, *op.cit.*, 42.

6 The transtheoretical model of change theorizes stages of pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance (Prochaska, et al 1992).



ing her historical place in teaching us what it means for one to be a “lover of himself [*sic*]” by moving away from binding cultural constraints and deadly dominion. From the many constrictions, societal abuses, and ill-treatment of women in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, she emerges as one who knows that her peace and happiness depend on her own opinion of herself and on being loved by God. The term, self-actualization or self-differentiation, can also be expressed as “becoming the persons God created us to be” or in Susanna Wesley’s journal fragments, citing Richard Lucas and Blaise Pascal, implied in the words, “Every man [*sic*] ought to be so far a lover of himself as to prefer the peace and tranquility of his own mind before that of others...” (Wesley 1997, 241). Many women like me who are not in the Wesleyan tradition, never heard much about Susanna Wesley. I write on the assumption that there are also women in the Wesleyan tradition who desire more. As Susanna Wesley is placed in dialogue with a modern feminist, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, our historical debt to the mother of Methodism will become evident.

1. becoming one’s own person (EMW); a lover of oneself (SW)

The Meditation

Philosophy and morality are not sufficient to restrain us from those sins that our constitution of body, circumstances of life or evil custom strongly dispose us to. Nature and appetite will be too hard for their precepts unless a man be determined by a law within himself. They may teach him caution and give check to his vicious inclinations in public but will never carry him to an inward and universal purity. This is only to be effected by the power of religion which will direct us to a serious application to God in fervent prayer, upon which we shall feel a disengagement from the impressions sensual objects were wont to make on our minds, and an inward strength and disposition to resist them (Ibid, 324).

There are many contemporary expressions to describe what Susanna Wesley is doing with this attention to her inner self. Some of these terms are “self-actualization,” or “the authentic self,” or “the solid self.” To be a lover of herself involves honoring the precepts, the values, and the religious outlook that she herself has chosen. Furthermore, this inner core of precepts, values, and beliefs are harmonious and consistent with her life direction and actions. This is to be true to oneself, to be authentic.

“We must preserve the government of reason and not suffer our passions to get the ascendant over us.... Therefore, be sure to be very hearty and earnest in praying to God for strength to govern and regulate your affections” (Ibid, 219). Becoming one’s own person for Susanna Wesley meant resisting the image of Woman as sensual, alluring, lustful creature. This counters the depiction in her son’s poetry of the sensuous Woman: “Artful her Bosom heaved, her rolling Eyes Allured with Glances whom in Heart she succumbed....”

Susanna Wesley was a formative influence in the lives of her children. In correspondence between Susanna and Emilia, her daughter, Susanna writes: “I will not take upon me to read you a lecture of anatomy, but shall only make some general observations, which may yet be sufficient to show that even the body of man [*sic*] bears the impress of infinite power and wisdom in the order, fitness, and usefulness of every part of it....Being all knit together by an admirable symmetry...” (Ibid, 432). Influenced by a lecture given by a mentor, Richard Bentley, she elaborates on the beauty of the body – the eye, the ear, smelling, feeling – as a noble fabric.

We also note her sense of personal boundaries, the opposite of enabling behavior. She prays for great freedom of mind, for the improvement of her talents, for industry. She quotes Pascal on the goal of authentic selfhood, then follows with a description of inauthentic selves, “...They are not satisfied with that life they possess in themselves in their own proper being, but are fond of leading an imaginary life in the idea of others...” (Ibid, 219). To her children, she instructs: “Preserve the dignity of your nature. Reverence yourself, and do nothing unworthy the reason God has given you” (Ibid, 236). It is noteworthy that she instructed her daughters as well as her sons.

2. recalling the distinctive feature of Christianity, i. e., God became body

Susanna turns to an Almighty God as “a healer, a repairer of the lapse and misery of human nature, a Saviour, him whom our soul loveth” (Ibid, 321). She asks for disengagement from “sensual objects” that could impress her mind (Ibid, 324). All of these petitions are made with the assumption she has been given the grace to center her soul, body, and mind in God. This unity of body and mind is in accord with Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel’s understanding, “The message of Jesus relates to human beings in their to-

tality, in their bodies...” (Moltmann-Wendel 1994, 37). Moltmann-Wendel traces the history of the Christian church and illustrates how the woman’s body became invisible in not only the Christian church but in its theology.

the meditation (incarnation):

“To behold [God] in Jesus Christ, ‘reconciling the world unto himself;’ to see by faith that infinite, all-glorious Being assuming the character of a Saviour, a repairer of the lapse, and healer of the diseases and miseries of mankind... penetrates and melts the soul. It is something the heart feels and labors under, but my tongue cannot express” (Wesley 1997, 352). Citing Colossians 2:9, Susanna finds God as God is, by and in Jesus Christ, in whom “dwelleth the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Ibid). The distinctive feature of Christianity becomes God incarnate, who in taking on flesh becomes a “repairer of the lapse” between the divine and the human. As such, the Incarnate One becomes the healer of diseases and miseries. God not only became flesh but also became flesh through the body of a woman named Mary. Through the travail and labors of a woman, the all-glorious Being became a child named Jesus of Nazareth.

3. claiming woman’s “other fertility” or her spirituality and creativity of mind and soul

Susanna Wesley, biologically fertile with multiple pregnancies, was also able to live into the “other fertility” Moltmann-Wendel describes. This shift occurs when women step into their own selves and are not identified by their biological offspring. Susanna Wesley’s meditations reveal her place as spiritual director to her sons and her sons’ friends in The Holy Club in Oxford as well as a spiritual friend to others like Alice Peard. Moltmann-Wendel introduces the concept of *familia dei* as the starting point of a new female life-style (Moltmann-Wendel 1994, 40). Again, this framework places woman in a sacred configuration of family, not bounded by blood ties.

the meditation (the other fertility)

“...’tis our highest wisdom to disengage our affections, as much as we lawfully may, from all these

transitory temporal enjoyments and to fix ‘em on those more solid, more rational and spiritual pleasures we are to enjoy when we enter our state of immortality” (Wesley 1997, 206). The New Testament introduces a new way of kinship. The terms brothers, sisters, children are not primarily in biological terms but terms of spiritual birth and connection. Through Christ as Firstborn of the Family of God, we are brought into new relationships. This rhetoric is used in Ephesians, Galatians, and Romans as “adoption.” For example, spiritual mothers and fathers are fertile through the working of the Spirit of God. Fertility is not limited to biological procreation. It is this “family of God” that Susanna offers as a complementary if not preeminent fertility.

4. emphasizing woman’s propagation of Jesus’ familia dei, which is the starting point of a new female life-style

Susanna Wesley has been acclaimed as the originator of the first Methodist meetings held in the parsonage in 1711. As numbers grew over two hundred people, she was accused by the local curate of starting a conventicle! Nevertheless, she continued ministering to the “family of God” (*familia dei*).

the letter

The letter to her husband Samuel Wesley on February 6 1711/12 stated: “As I am a woman, so I am also mistress of a large family. And though the superior charge of the souls contained in it lies upon you, as head of the family, and as their minister, yet in your absence I cannot but look upon every soul you leave under my care as a talent committed to me, under a trust, by the great Lord of all the families of heaven and earth” (Ibid 79). In the early 18th century, women were expected to become married and raise children or enter a religious order. Susanna did the former but managed to integrate her religious belief in *familia dei* into a new lifestyle, in a way, a radical ministry which was opposed by her husband.

5. “thinking with the body”

Thinking with the body is an epistemological concept, which escapes the separation of analytical thought



and the intuition of feeling. It involves a participatory attitude of involvement with the world; the body is the medium of experiencing the world. Susanna *knew* the need of the people around her. She read sermons every Sunday afternoon to neighbors in her home church. She reached vast numbers of unchurched people in the village. On February 25, 1711/12, in a letter to Samuel, Sr., who was away in London for Convocation, she wrote, "Some families which very seldom came to church, now go constantly. One person that has not been there this seven years is now prevailed on to go with the rest" (Ibid, 82).

Moltmann-Wendel develops this epistemological concept of "thinking with the body" by recalling the way women's bodies have functioned in history: "Women are seismographs for changes in culture, and their bodies are the places where conflicts become unmistakably evident" (Moltmann-Wendel 1994, 8). Social conflicts such as rape, battering, incest abuse, sex trafficking, prostitution, and abuse are worked out in and on their bodies. Moltmann-Wendel asserts that theology must begin with violated bodies and that our world perspectives should start there. Women must think and understand and intuit, not from their minds, but from their bodies. The body is the hinge of the human personality. Life begins in a mother's body. Life with God in Christ began with God becoming flesh in the body of a woman, Mary.

portraits



Unfortunately, the fire in the Epworth manse destroyed many of the Wesley family's memorabilia. There are portraits of Susanna Wesley, which I find informative of her complexity.

This portrait [pictured left] which Abel Stevens, American Methodist (1858), included in his book, *History of the Religious Movement of the Eighteenth Century called Methodism*, is of a young woman with low neckline and a scarf framing her shining hair. He said of her:

The portrait is of the refined and even elegant lady of the times. The features are slight, but almost classical in their regularity... Her dress and coiffure are in the simplest style of her day, and the entire picture is marked by chaste gracefulness. It lacks not, also, an air of that high-

bred aristocracy from which she was descended... Adam Clarke [one of the earliest and most reliable Wesley family historians] says she was not only graceful but beautiful (Stevens 1858, 156).

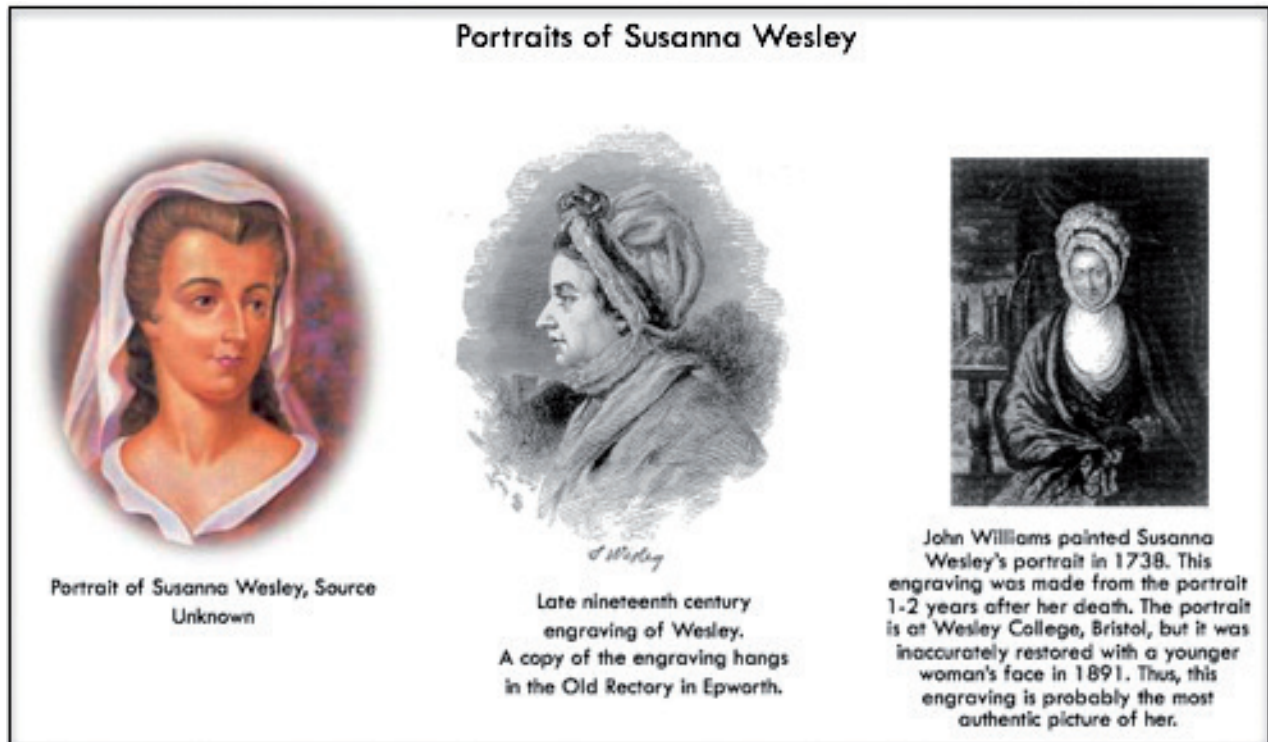
It is in Clarke's comment that the reader becomes aware of not only her acclaimed inner beauty but also of her outer physical beauty and sensuality.

Whereas historians have highlighted Susanna's intellect and efficiency, Eliza Clarke also calls attention to her beauty and fitness. According to Clarke's 1886 biography titled *Susanna Wesley*, "Susanna was slim and very pretty, and retained her good looks and symmetry of figure to old age, although she was the mother of nineteen children" (Clarke 1886, 7–8). "She was nothing if not religious; but she was a lady of ancient lineage, a woman of intellect, a keen politician, and, had her ordinary correspondence been preserved, it would have given us insight into the life of the period which would have been full of deep and world-wide interest" (Ibid, vi) In a way, the poems written by her son, Samuel Wesley, Jr., give us some of that insight.

According to an account in *The Ladies' Repository* in 1857, Susanna was "nobly descended, carefully and piously educated, highly gifted, graceful in form, and more beautiful even than her beautiful sister... was a perfect woman, nobly planned to warn, to comfort, and command, and yet a spirit still and bright, with something of an angel light" (Olin 1857, 386).

The varying accounts and portraits illustrate the complexity and the maturity of Susanna Wesley. The depictions emphasize both traditionally "feminine" qualities and "masculine" traits such as intellect, efficiency and assertiveness. For example, the self-possession with which she opposed the views of her forceful father, Dr. Annesley, is noteworthy for a young girl not quite thirteen. As mentioned earlier, Dr. Annesley was a leader of the Dissenting cause, which found fault with the dominant Church of England. Susanna, against her father's wishes, adhered to the Church of England!

She acknowledged the worth of the children she bore, not as objects to be seen and not heard, but as subjects worthy of undivided attention each week. For each day of the week, she had an hour set aside with a specific child (or two children) where they had personal attention. She was not just a vessel bearing children, she was a teacher of the children of God. When her husband fell into repeated debt,



even debtor's prison, she was resilient and resourceful. When her husband abandoned her, she asserted herself by riding 14 miles to appeal to Lady Yarborough by writing a letter of appeal to Bishop Hicke. In this way she circumvented the power brokers, the Archbishop of York and Bishop of Lincoln, to whom her husband Samuel wanted to refer. She survived a fire (probably arson) which destroyed her home, coped with the deaths of nine children, and stood resolute when disinherited from her father's will.

As we women [and men] learn to step into ourselves, to self-differentiate from our family of origin, to self-actualize, and to become the persons that God created us to be, we realize Susanna Wesley made historical advances. From one extreme, entailing hatred of the body or objectification of women as weak vessels or depictions of women as having no souls, to the contemporary advances made by theologians like Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, Susanna Wesley's journal entries, writings, and letters reveal her place if not stronghold on the continuum toward a theology of embodiment. In her exposition of the Apostles Creed, in her understanding of the Resurrection of the Body, she credited God with the power to "rebuild the same beautiful fabric..." in other words, the body—her body (Wesley 1997, 395).

In 1980, in her diary, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel discovered, what she termed, a feminist doctrine of justification: "I am good – I am whole – I am beautiful" (Moltmann-Wendel 1997, 108). This awareness was long in coming to one who had been socialized to be "good" to everyone but herself. For women over the ages, this awareness is a calibration of the conscience and the conscious. It is not a linear construct like a timeline. Rather, it is a gradual unfolding or a cylindrical evolvment into an understanding of the beautiful fabric of the body. This fine-tuning or calibration of the conscience and the conscious has been done by women like Wesley and Moltmann-Wendel who have helped teach others to become "a lover of oneself."

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