

“Happiness Engineers,” Video Games Designers, and Wesley’s Vision for Revival and Renewal

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The Context

The work of this Oxford Institute was defined by a series of questions. In this paper, I will directly address two of them:

--What are the authentic marks of Christian revival and renewal?

--Does Methodism have a future? If so, what might its shape(s) be?

In brief, the answers I offer are:

--People who are genuinely happy and holy provide the indisputable signs of a renewed and revived church.

--Methodism’s future lies in re-claiming its founder’s call to the vocation of changing lives by promoting happiness. To do this, competing, secular programs for creating happiness should be taken seriously, learning from them as appropriate, and challenging them when necessary. Key to achieving this revived future will be reclaiming Wesley’s powerful method of fostering genuine happiness--mimesis.

Introduction and Overview

John Wesley offered a compelling vision of Christianity as a way of life, with the goal of achieving “happiness.” He also offered clear directions on how to achieve that way of life: for Wesley the way to happiness is through holiness. The contemporary world of Western culture offers competing visions of happiness from that of Wesley, as well as radically different ways of achieving that vision of fulfillment. The church needs to meet these challenges, learn why they are alluring, and make clear why Wesley’s vision is an even more attractive and powerful alternative.

In this paper I will first describe Wesley’s authentic marks of Christian revival as necessarily including genuine “happiness,” as seen in the “renewed heart.” For this, I will draw on his “Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained,” and a selection of his sermons. I will also note that Wesley’s pedagogical method of spreading this vision was not to start with abstract doctrine, but to emphasize how Christianity looked in real life—inviting Christian mimesis. For a deeper look at this method I will look to the *Arminian Magazine*, with the help of a research tool developed by W. Stephen Gunter.

Having laid out Wesley’s understanding of the nature of the Christian life and how it is best spread, I will next sketch a competing, secular, vision of the good life that is being increasingly embraced by our contemporary culture. This is seen especially in the growing movement known as “positive psychology.” This vision sounds strikingly similar to Wesley’s Christian vision—especially in its promise of happiness and personal fulfillment through the promotion of certain emotions. But the differences from Wesley’s vision are also striking--and decisive.

To understand positive psychology, I will look at the key work of the founder of this movement, Martin Seligman's *Authentic Happiness*.¹ Following this, I will show how several of positive psychology's key emphases have been taken over, and monetized, by those feeding a widespread passion of young people today--video game designers. For this I will look at an important text in that field, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make us Better and How They Can Change the World* by Jane McGonigal.² While my analysis will make clear how this secular vision of fulfillment is quite different from Wesley's, I will also show how the success of these "happiness engineers" can offer encouragement, and direction, for Wesleyans to pursue their own explicitly Christian goals for renewal and evangelism.

I. Wesley's Vision of Christian Fulfillment

For Wesley, Christianity's call to holiness and the pursuit of happiness were inseparable. Like Plato, Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas (to mention only a few), Wesley was a *eudaemonist*, that is, he held that the true end of the human being was happiness. But unlike some of his predecessors, true happiness for Wesley meant happiness in God, which implied "holiness," thus the constant conjunction of these terms in his writings.

Wesley's stress on happiness and holiness as the marks of the Christian life is present in his published sermons, his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, and many of his other works. Regarding the *Sermons*, Albert Outler states in a note in his Introduction to the *Sermons* that the correlation of happiness and holiness appears in no fewer than 30 of Wesley's sermons.³ The centrality of happiness in Wesley's view of life is even seen negatively in Sermon 78 "Spiritual Idolatry" where we are told that the best way to keep ourselves from idols is to "be deeply convinced that none of them bring happiness."⁴ (#78, 111)

The couplet "happiness and holiness," as well as the individual component words, appear in Wesley's *Notes Upon the New Testament* almost as often as the word "love." He even translates "*makario*" as "happy" in the beatitudes instead of "blessed" (as the *Philips* and *Good News* translations also do). The "children of light" therefore are "The children of God; wise, holy, happy." (John 12:36)⁵ Likewise "So great a salvation-- A deliverance from so great wickedness and misery, into so great happiness and holiness." (Heb. 2:3); and "Is for the present grievous, yet it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness--Holiness and happiness." (Heb. 12:11) Thus, even the ultimate end of humanity is cast in terms of that which satisfies the heart most fully, that affective enjoyment of completeness: happiness.⁶

¹ (New York: Free Press, 2002).

² (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

³ *The Works of John Wesley*, Oxford/Abingdon edition, 1984--). (Hereafter, *Works*) 1: 35 n. 28.

⁴ Wesley's *Sermons* will be noted by their number in the Oxford/Abingdon edition.

⁵ When referring to Wesley remarks on scripture I will be quoting from his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1976) (henceforth, *N.T. Notes*) which was first published in 1756. When referring to this work, I will assume that the scripture references are themselves enough documentation to find the quotes, so I will not provide more detailed footnotes. When a passage contains a dash (--) the material quoted before the dash is the biblical passage itself (KJV, sometimes slightly amended by Wesley), while what follows the dash is Wesley's comment.

⁶ Just a few of the other references to happiness and holiness in Wesley's *N.T. Notes* include: 1 John

In the opening section of “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion” Wesley succinctly describes the goal of his ministry by saying “You ask me what I would do with them. I would make them virtuous and happy, easy in them-selves, and useful to others.”⁷ He then goes on to emphasize that happiness is the proper concern of religion (“are you now happy?” 60ff) and that “inward” religion, the religion of the “tempers,” is what he preaches (63, 88ff). Making clear that he is not merely recommending certain intense inner states, in “A Farther Appeal, Part I,” he states that while we are meant to *feel* peace, joy and love, the best proof of being led by the Spirit is not merely a sensation but a “thorough change and renovation of mind and heart, and the leading a new and holy life.”⁸

The centrality of the renewed and happy life in his vision of Christianity is especially clear at one point in his writings. In his “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” when Wesley wanted to convey the essence of the Gospel, he did not begin with the question “What is Christianity?” Instead, he asked: “*Who* is a Christian?” This starting point makes all the difference.⁹

There he said that Christianity is, in the first place, a “principle in the soul,”— something best seen in embodied humans, including a certain character of the inner life. Even when he goes on to discuss Christianity more formally or abstractly as “a scheme or system of doctrine,” he emphasizes that the aim of any scheme of doctrine is to describe what Christianity looks like when it is enfolded, by describing the “affections” that it engenders. Doctrine is then to promise that this character should be mine, and then tell us how I may attain it.¹⁰

The true scope for theology, and its proper place in the Christian life for Wesley, then, is to serve as a guide to becoming a Christian.

Wesley’s “Foundationalism”

In his Sermon “On Original Sin” Wesley says, “Ye know that the great end of religion is to renew our hearts in the image of God.” (# 44, 185) Albert Outler comments on this passage that this renewal of the heart is the “axial theme of Wesley’s soteriology.”¹¹ And, certainly, soteriology stands at the center of Wesley’s theology. So, the renewal of the heart is what Wesley was ultimately about.¹²

Metaphysical speculation, or finding a naturalistic or philosophic framework on which to found Christianity, then, was *not* Wesley’s theological goal. Instead, I think it is

(Introduction), Matt. 6:10, Matt. 5:3, Matt. 5:12, Matt. 5:48, 1 Cor. 15:31.

⁷ *Works*, Volume 11, 51.

⁸ *Ibid.* 141.

⁹ First published as part of a letter to Conyers Middleton in 1749, then as a separate pamphlet in 1753. It is now found in *Works*, Volume 11, 527-538.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 531-2.

¹¹ *Works*, 2, 185n.

¹² I have proposed that the “renewal of the heart” should be seen as the key “orienting concern” of Wesley’s theology, in contrast to Randy Maddox’s “responsible grace” (as found in his book by that title). This proposal is found in my *The Renewal of the Heart is the Mission of the Church: Wesley’s Heart Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010, 28ff). This suggestion has been endorsed and taken up by Don Adams in his *Top Ten Methodist Beliefs* (Abingdon, 2016), see pages 31ff.

fair to say that Wesley's theology operated on an epistemic *foundationalism*, but *not* in the Cartesian sense. Wesley invited people into Christianity through a kind of *foundationalism of the lived life*.

Foundationalism is the theory of knowledge that claims that in order to know anything, we must know something *absolutely*. Descartes, in explaining his method of doubt, said that the one thing we cannot deny is that when we doubt something, we are thinking. Since the reality of thinking cannot be doubted, because we *think*, we must draw the conclusion that we *are*—*cogito ergo sum*—I think, therefore I am.

In contrast, Wesley's way of proceeding theologically, while he never characterized it as a kind of "foundationalism," does exhibit the logic of foundationalism. He says, in essence, "Consider the way a person lives—whether or not he or she is happy—and take that as the ultimate guide to the worth of their way of life." If they are truly happy in Wesley's definition—seen in a life that is holy—then their way of life is the best one. And that way of life is worthy of emulation

To foster this emulation, Wesley emphasized stories of embodied Christianity. Such stories—witnessing and biography--require no philosophical or metaphysical introductory explanation or conceptual grounding. Instead, encountering stories of real, changed lives invites imagination--and mimesis.

Wesley's Pedagogical Method

There certainly are many resources to look at in the Wesleyan corpus of writings to find his recommendations of exemplary Christians (e.g., *The Christian Library*, as well as in his *Journals* and *Letters*), but focusing on the *Arminian Magazine* proves to be a fruitful source for seeing Wesley's method at work.

A great help in aiding the exploration of this source is W. Stephen Gunter's on-line resource titled *An Annotated Content Index of the Arminian Magazine, Volumes 1-20 (1778-1797)*.¹³ Gunter, recently retired from the Divinity School of Duke University, has summarized in almost 600 pages the various material that appeared in the *Arminian Magazine (AM)*. Most helpful for my purposes is the Genre Index that he has put together. Here he compiles all the different genres represented in the *AM*.

Seeing the distribution of 74 types of literature represented here, my initial inclination to look at the *AM* for illustration of Wesley's person-centered approach to Christianity was reinforced, as the genre with the most entries was "Biography" with 322 examples over the 20 year run of the magazine, while the second-most numerous genre was "Autobiographies" with 299 examples. For comparison, the third largest category was "Sermons" with 246, while the fourth was "Theological Discussions" with 244.

This emphasis on the lived lives of Christians can be seen in Wesley's editorial comments, found in several places throughout the run of the magazine. As quoted by Gunter, in the very first volume Wesley claims that each issue will consist of four parts:

¹³ This material is available to download as a PDF at this site:

https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/cswt/Arminian_Magazine_vols_1-20.pdf

I am thankful for the hospitality given me during the 2017 Wesley Studies Summer Seminar hosted by Asbury Seminary and Dr. Ken Collins where I could give Gunter's resource an in-depth exploration.

(1) A defense of the “grand Christian doctrine, ‘God willeth all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of truth.’” (2) An extract from the life of a holy person (“whether Lutheran, Church of England, Calvinist, or Arminian”). (3) Accounts and letters from the experience of pious persons (most of whom are still alive). (4) Verses explaining or confirming the “capital-doctrines we have in view.”¹⁴

As seen especially in his second and third intended emphases for the magazine, Wesley saw it as crucial to present examples of what the Christianity looks like in real life. For Wesley, this could lead to enlivening the imagination about what the Christian life can be, and then inviting mimesis: We become Christians by being inspired by, and then imitating, the lives of other Christians.

Once we see compelling depictions of lives that demand an explanation, we need to articulate that explanation, so it can be duplicated. This is the main task of a “scheme of doctrine” according to Wesley in his “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” as discussed above. So, the true role for orthodox theology is shaping our everyday lives, including our inner life. But doctrine only finds its true place in the Christian life after the examples of Christians have made their persuasive impact.

Wesley’s Vision in Consonance with the Tradition

This Wesleyan way of conceiving the essence of Christianity as a way of life of striving toward happiness and holiness—and his practical method of fostering the spread of that way of life through mimesis—is consistent with broad swathes of the larger Christian tradition, and is certainly grounded in Scripture.

Hebrews 13:7 says “Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; *consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*” (NRSV emphasis mine.) So, in hoping to spread the faith, the most important activity a Christian can do is to point people to those living a Christian way of life. Faith flows *from* such an encounter; faith is not the *prerequisite* for understanding the enacted Christian life. Faith in the sense of “belief” *flows from* seeing its *consequences*. The convert is invited to examine lived, embodied, Christianity and say “If faith leads to that kind of life, then I will believe.”

Similar to this is Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians where he describes the Christians of Corinth as themselves a kind of “letter” that commends the work of Paul. He seems to be saying “Consider the lives of these people and judge for yourselves the power of the truth and power of the Gospel I preach.” (See 2 Corinthians 3:1-3)¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid. page 4 of Gunter’s summary.

¹⁵ When I was a part of a two-year Academy for Spiritual Formation, sponsored by the UMC’s Upper Room, one of our presenters was a Roman Catholic priest. This priest shared a story from his youth in Wisconsin. When a priest asked him, as a young boy, why he was a Christian, he answered “Because my parents are.” This response was met with a whack on the head by the priest. Looking back on this exchange, the priest said “To this day, I don’t know what is wrong with that answer.” We can only speculate that the answer acceptable to the punishing priest might have been to quote some passage from the *Catechism*, or to say something like “Because Christianity is the fullest truth” or “Because Jesus was the true incarnation of God,” or perhaps “Because God is three Persons in one God.” But in fact, our theological assertions only make sense when surrounded by, and embodied in, a life manifesting the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-24)—one of Wesley’s favorite scripture passages. One way to interpret the beginning of the priest’s faith journey is that he saw such fruit embodied in the lives of his parents—and he wanted to be like them.

The observation that Christianity is more often *caught* than *taught* speaks to this. Such a declaration is not a dismissive commentary on the effectiveness of our catechetical programs, or, more broadly, on the intellectual acuity of Christians. It is simply a description of how Christianity is intended to work. The whole point of Christianity is to transform lives, and nothing gets us started in the transformation process more powerfully and directly than seeing a life that has been changed.¹⁶

Christian catechesis is about taking the Gospel, including all of its deep mysteries, and forming one's life around that basic message of forgiveness and love. What needs to be conveyed and made understandable in catechesis is not necessarily every point in the creeds. What needs to be made understandable is what a changed life looks like. That is an undeniable and formidable witness to the power of Christianity. The assent of the believer to the assertions of the creed typically *follows* that, not *precedes* that.¹⁷

¹⁶ I think this is what Francis Spufford was getting at in his description of Christianity—expressed pithily in the title of his 2013 book: *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*. (New York: Harper One, 2013.) I would say—and I think Wesley would say-- that “emotional sense” is the kind of sense that Christianity was, and is, *supposed* to make—when we properly understand emotions—or, as Wesley termed them, “affections.”

¹⁷ While my point here has been to make clear Wesley's views of the necessary, logical, connections between the Gospel message and the life of the heart, there are, in fact, many other voices in the Christian tradition that reinforce Wesley's person-centered approach to Christianity, including:

- Soren Kierkegaard, who said that Christianity is “an existence communication.” (See his *Journals and Papers*, i. 187, 484, 517, 676, 1060; iii. 3748; vi. 6528). “Kierkegaard maintained that Christianity is not a doctrine but an 'existence-communication' (JP). By this he meant that what Christianity seeks to communicate to individuals is not knowledge about Christianity, although some preliminary information must first be imparted, but an inward capability for existing authentically through a relation to God or the eternal in time in the form of an individual human being, Jesus Christ (JP i. 650-3, 657).” Sylvia Walsh, found at Walsh, Sylvia. Kierkegaard : Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode, Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2008. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uindy-ebooks/detail.action?docID=431358>.
- C. S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1952) that moving from *bios* to *zoe* is “precisely what Christianity is about.” (p. 159) and that “putting on Christ, dressing up as the Son of God, “is the whole of Christianity.” (p.195)
- George Lindbeck says in his *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) “As actually lived, a religion may be pictured as a single, gigantic proposition. It is a true proposition to the extent that its objectivities are interiorized and exercised by groups and individuals in such a way as to conform them in some measure in the various dimensions of their existence to the ultimate reality and goodness that lies at the heart of things. It is a false proposition to the extent that this does not happen.” (p.51)
- Contemporary (Wesleyan!) biblical scholars Richard Hays and Joel Green see that the authority of the Bible is not primarily established through theoretical defense of the book, but is found in how it shapes the life of the community. Green, in his article “Contribute or Capitulate?” says “...the authority of scripture is best discerned in the lives (and not only the assertions) of those communities oriented around scripture...” (*Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 39, 2004, 81-82.) Similarly, Richard Hays, referring to a passage in Paul's writings, says that Paul is there working out “the claim that the true meaning of scripture is made manifest in the transformed lives in the community of faith.” *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, xiii).
- Related to the point of Hays and Green, even Augustine, in his *On Christian Doctrine*, originally written 396-427, (modern edition Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958) said that the whole purpose

In sum, I think the best way to describe the Wesleyan vision of Christianity is to see it as a way of life, a way of life marked by happiness, holiness, and all of the fruit of the Spirit which are manifested in the “religious affections.”¹⁸

II. A Competing, Secular Vision: Contemporary Happiness Engineers

Contemporary psychologists, and their monetizers in the video game industry, also offer a vision of happiness and its component emotions, one that is quite different from Wesley and the Christian tradition. Workers in the field of positive psychology and the world of video game designers—whom we might collectively characterize as “happiness engineers” —have put their finger on our deepest human spiritual hungers, our longing for happiness.

But while their secular visions of human fulfillment promise happiness, they cannot deliver on their promises in the same way that Wesley’s vision can. Hopefully, the church can take some encouragement from this movement, however, since their spreading influence might shame the church back into taking seriously its deepest calling as Wesley saw it: to name—and meet—the spiritual hunger for meaningful happiness.

There is nothing particularly new about a secular approach to happiness. Aristotle, writing on happiness and the virtues, defines happiness as functioning well in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Likewise, utilitarian writers like Bentham and Mill also make use of “happiness” as the proper goal of life. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson in Wesley’s own time came close to emphasizing a less explicitly Christian view of happiness—

of the Bible is to promote faith, hope and love—a way of living in the world that is shaped by the Gospel. He said that once one has an unshakeable hold on faith, hope and love, that the Bible is not even needed anymore, except for the instruction of others. (p. 32)

- Philosophers William Wainwright (*Reason and the Heart*, Cornell University Press, 1995) and John Cottingham (*The Spiritual Dimension*, Cambridge University Press, 2005) have written convincingly from their own philosophical viewpoint about how reason must be in dialog with lived passion if we are to make sense of what religion is about. Wainwright says “Passion, sentiment and affection may be necessary conditions of using our cognitive faculties correctly.” (p.154) Cottingham says “...emotional colouring has the effect not just of supplementing an objective state of affairs with a subjective reaction, but rather of reconstituting the state of affairs itself. ...our religious (and moral and aesthetic) experience involves transformative ways of perceiving reality. p. 85.

In different ways, I think all of these thinkers are expressing, using a variety of conceptualities, views consistent with what I have called Wesley’s “foundationalism” of the lived life.

¹⁸ On Wesley’s understanding of the “religious affections,” including how he saw them as having intellectual integrity, as well as logical linkage to Christian activity in the world, see my books:

--*John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and their Role in the Christian Way of Life and Theology* (Scarecrow Press: 1989) This was the first in the Pietist and Wesleyan Studies Series, edited by Steve O’Malley and David Bundy. (Series now continued by publishers Rowman and Little.)

--*As If the Heart Mattered: A Wesleyan Spirituality* (First published by Upper Room Books in 1997; reprinted by Wipf and Stock, 2014) In this book I elaborate on Wesley’s image of Christianity as like a house, with the “porch” being repentance, the “door” being faith, and the “house itself” as holiness.

--*The Renewal of the Heart is the Mission of the Church* (Cascade Books, 2010), a synthesis of many of these themes.

--And, most recently, my chapter on Wesley on the affections in *The Religious Affections and the Christian Tradition* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2016).

views that Wesley attacked. But none of these thinkers have provided the kind of thoroughly worldly celebration of happiness that positive psychology has put forth. This current movement has gathered momentum especially because it carries the banner of “science.”

Some Strengths, and Weaknesses, of Positive Psychology

Martin Seligman, in his groundbreaking overview of positive psychology *Authentic Happiness*, says that psychology had been consumed for most of the 20th century with one topic: mental illness. Freud represented this when he asserted that all civilization is just an elaborate defense against basic conflicts over infantile sexuality and aggression. But Seligman, as president of the prestigious American Psychological Association, in his 1998 presidential address, gave a revolutionary speech calling on his field to stop being obsessed with pathology, and instead start to study how to promote happiness.

Sounding similar to Aristotle's definition of happiness as “functioning well,” Seligman claims that authentic happiness comes from identifying and cultivating one's fundamental strengths and using them every day in work, love, playing and parenting. He says that positive psychology is built on three pillars: 1) the study of positive emotions; 2) the study of positive traits that he calls strengths and virtues; 3) the study of positive institutions. (Interestingly, this third element is not covered in his book, which might be seen as an unspoken, tantalizing invitation for the church to find a place in his scheme.)

To see positive psychology in biblical terms, I think it is fair to characterize this field as pursuing a parallel quest to Wesley's: a quest for the properly formed “heart.” As a matter of fact, some of Seligman's recommendations for increasing happiness are strikingly parallel to mainstream Christianity, such as recommending thankfulness, forgiveness and doing works of kindness for others as key components of human flourishing. However, for Seligman and his followers, all of these can be undertaken without reference to God. In fact, the motivation for these behaviors is to be taken from the fact that scientific research has shown the hedonic value of these activities. In other words, one should do these things because “Science says these things are good for you.”

Which positive emotions and character strengths did he choose to emphasize? His selection criteria included that they be valued in almost every culture, that they be valued in their own right (not just as a means to other ends), and also that they are malleable, changeable—that is, that they are capable of being shaped and grown. Seligman's six core virtues are 1) wisdom and knowledge; 2) courage; 3) love and humanity; 4) justice, 5) temperance; and 6) spirituality and transcendence. Each core virtue can be further subdivided for the purpose of classification and measurement.

In my view, these categories are so broad as to be practically meaningless. What counts as “wisdom” or “spirituality?” Many of these positive traits need to be greatly further specified by their most appropriate *objects*. For instance, what part of reality should we target with our attention to grow courage? What should we pay attention to in order to be more temperate? Just what are we supposed to “transcend,” and what is the ultimate purpose of this “transcendence?”

In chapter 4 Seligman asks the question: “Can you make yourself lastingly happier?” On page 45 he answers this positively by listing the happiness formula: $H=S+C+V$ or H equals “Happiness,” S equals “Set range,” C equals “Circumstances,” and V equals “Voluntary control.” **S**et range is largely genetic and hence is not susceptible to change (he posited this in part because of his study of identical twins raised in different environments.) **C**ircumstances and variables within **V**oluntary control, however, *can* be changed, though changing circumstance proves less effective than most think.

Seligman spends a large part of his book discussing how to increase positive emotions through actions under our Voluntary Control (the “V” of the happiness formula.) These are classified in three different ways: positive emotions about the past; positive emotions about the future; and positive emotions about the present. The third category, those actions relating to present happiness, breaks down into *pleasures* and *gratifications*, which leads to the rest of the book.

With regard to satisfaction about the past, insufficient *appreciation* and *savoring* of the good events in your past, and overemphasis of the bad ones, are the two main culprits that undermine serenity, contentment and satisfaction. There are two ways of bringing these feelings about the past into the region of contentment and satisfaction. *Gratitude* amplifies the savoring and appreciation of the good events, and rewriting history through *Forgiveness* loosens the power of the events and can transform bad memories into good ones.

Typical of the (soft) science behind these assertions is a control experiment that was conducted where researchers randomly assigned two groups of people to keep a daily diary for two weeks of either happenings they were grateful for or of hassles of life. Happiness and life satisfaction shot up for the gratitude group. How you feel about the past--contentment or pride, versus bitterness or shame--he claims depends entirely on your memories, and the reason gratitude works to increase life satisfaction is that it amplifies the intensities of good memories about events in the past.

Positive psychology emphasizes that the human brain has evolved to ensure that our “firefighting,” negative emotions will trump the broadening, building and abiding, but more fragile, positive emotions. The only way out of this emotional wilderness is to change your thoughts by rewriting your past—forgiving, forgetting or suppressing bad memories. Of these, the most possible is forgiving. This leaves the memory intact, but removes--and even transforms—the pain. You cannot hurt the perpetrator by not forgiving, but you can save yourself grief by forgiving. His book has a scale for transgression motivation and a section on how to forgive.

This leads to a chapter on *optimism*, his key positive emotion about the future. Optimism, and how to promote it, is one of the areas Seligman has worked hardest to understand. He says that a well-documented method for building optimism consists of recognizing, and then disputing, pessimistic thoughts. His “ABCDE” model A stands for Adversity; B for the Beliefs you automatically have that occur; C for the usual Consequences of the belief; D for Disputation of your routine belief; and E for the energization that occurs when you dispute it successfully.

One difference between positive psychology and Christian approaches can be seen in Seligman’s emphasis on optimism as the positive emotion to strive for with regard to the future. This can be helpfully contrasted with Brother David Steindl-Rast’s

Christian take on these matters. Steindl-Rast, a Roman Catholic monk, in his book *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer*¹⁹ says that optimists and pessimists are, surprisingly, a lot alike--both are “politicians,” that is, mostly concerned with parroting the party line. It is *hope*, Steindl-Rast says, not optimism, which is the more profound attitude about the future. Christians can express concern, and become deeply committed and involved with even seemingly hopeless causes, because they have a hope that is based on the Gospel story, not on the perceived likely outcome of the current situation. That is a qualitatively different attitude from the kind of “optimism” that Seligman promotes.

In overview, for Seligman, a “full life” consists in experiencing positive emotions about the past and future, savoring positive feelings from the pleasures, deriving abundant gratification from your signature strengths, and using the strengths in the service of something larger than oneself to obtain meaning.²⁰

Those familiar with Wesley’s “heart religion” will recognize in positive psychology’s *goals* at least a partially Christian vision. However, the Wesleyan *means* of achieving the goal of happiness—appropriating the Gospel of Christ’s love and forgiveness through the imitation of the lives of mature Christians—are lacking, and hence Christians see the secular project as doomed. The Christian Gospel provides a unifying narrative that powerfully, conceptually links what positive psychology sees as disparate traits that promote lasting happiness, especially forgiveness, gratitude, hope and love.

The Monetizers of Positive Psychology: Video Games and Happiness

Our actively capitalistic world quickly saw how taking the insights of these positive psychologists, and their pale imitation of Christian happiness, could profitably make video gaming more attractive and fulfilling by designing games guided by the principles of positive psychology. To understand this avenue to happiness that can compete with Christian views, let us first understand a bit about the nature of games.

Philosopher Bernard Suits gives what many in the video game field see as the single most convincing and useful definition of a game: *Playing a game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles*. Let us keep this definition in the back of our minds as we both try to understand contemporary video games, but also as we see if the Christian way of life can helpfully be seen through this prism of game theory.

Jane McGonigal says in her Introduction to *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* that for gamers, the real world increasingly feels like it’s missing something. “Gamers want to know: where in the real world is a gamer’s sense of being fully alive, focused and engaged every moment? Where is the gamer feeling of power, heroic purpose, and community? Where is the burst of exhilarating creative game accomplishment? Where is the heart expanding thrill

¹⁹ (New York: Paulist Press, 1984.)

²⁰ In addition to Seligman’s book, if one wants to learn more about the positive psychology movement, one can also consult two documentaries on positive psychology: *Happy and I Am*. These are currently available on Netflix. The book *Happier?* by Daniel Horowitz provides an interesting history of the positive psychology movement (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), while *The Science of Virtue* by Mark McGinn (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2017), which I just became aware of while I was researching this paper, explores some possible connections between positive psychology and Christianity, as seen in his subtitle: *Why Positive Psychology Matters to the Church*. From what I can tell, this book does not touch on issues of video gaming or game design.

of success and team victory?”²¹

The real world doesn't offer these things as easily as games. Reality seems to lack the carefully designed pleasures, the thrilling challenges, the powerful social bonding afforded by virtual environments. Reality doesn't motivate us effectively.

“Reality wasn't designed from the bottom up to make us happy” McGonigal says.²²

Reality, compared to games, is broken (hence the title of her book *Reality is Broken...*). She says that “The truth is this: in today's society computer and video games are fulfilling *genuine human needs* that the real world is currently unable to satisfy. Games are providing rewards that reality is not. They are teaching and inspiring and engaging us in ways that reality is not. They are bringing us together in ways that reality is not.” (emphasis hers)²³

McGonigal says that faced with this, we have three options. 1) to continue to escape from reality; 2) to repress escapist gaming; or 3) We could use game design to fix reality. She is obviously advocating for the third option, and I think the Christian church might be helpfully enlisted in this cause.

Spelling out her proposal, McGonigal describes what she takes to be the necessary traits of a game. All games share four things:

- 1) There must be a *specific outcome*. The players will work to achieve a sense of *purpose*.
- 2) A good game must have *rules that place limitations on how players can achieve the goal*.
- 3) The third defining trait is a *feedback system* which tells players how close they are to achieving the goal.
- 4) Finally, the fourth trait is *voluntary participation*, which requires that everyone is playing a game knowingly and willingly accepts the goal the rules on the feedback.²⁴

Relating this theory of games to happiness research, McGonigal says that gaming is about reorientation towards certain intrinsic rewards, specifically, the intrinsic rewards that positive psychology researchers say are the most essential to happiness. While she says that there is no definitive list of these rewards, there are significant positive psychology findings in the past decade which suggest a trajectory towards the following four major categories:

- First and foremost, we crave satisfying work every single day. The exact nature of the satisfying work is different from person-to-person, but for everyone it means being immersed in clearly defined, demanding activities that allow us to see the direct impact of our efforts.
- Second, we crave the experience, or at least the hope, of being successful. We want to feel powerful in our lives and show off to others what we're good at. We want to be optimistic about our own chances for success, to aspire to something, to feel like we're getting better over time.

²¹ Ibid. 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. 4.

²⁴ Ibid. 21.

- Third, we crave social connection. Humans are extremely social creatures and even the most introverted among us derive a large percentage of our happiness from spending time with the people we care about.
- Fourth and finally, we crave meaning or the chance to be a part of something larger than ourselves. We want to feel curiosity, awe, and wonder about things that unfold on epic scales. Most importantly, we want to belong to and contribute to something that has lasting significance beyond our own individual lives.²⁵

McGonigal addresses each of these more thoroughly in four subsequent chapters on each of these four human longings. With these four human needs in mind, she says that we need to engineer “more gameful ways of interacting with the real world and living our real lives.”²⁶

Given the scope of this present paper, I cannot hope to share in an in-depth way what she has to say about all four of these intrinsic rewards that gaming can promote. Let me just share a few of her thoughts on her first point—more satisfying work.

McGonigal says that good games make us happy because they are hard work that we choose for ourselves, and it turns out that almost nothing makes us happier than good, hard work. She acknowledges that we don't normally think of games as hard work since we “play” games, and we have been taught to think of play as the very opposite of work. But, she says, nothing could be further from the truth.

McGonigal says “the opposite of play is not work-- it is depression. When we're depressed, according to the clinical definition we suffer from two things: a pessimistic sense of inadequacy and a despondent lack of activity. If we were to reverse these two traits we get something like this: an optimistic sense of our own capabilities and invigorating rush of activity...” This is “a perfect description of the emotional state of gameplay...Gameplay is the direct emotional opposite of depression.” The game industry, she says, is giving us better hard work.²⁷

Pithily summing up this counter-intuitive linking of hard work and play, McGonigal quotes Noel Coward, saying, “work is more fun than fun.”²⁸ (This is related to what Seligman termed “hard fun”—which happens when we use our characteristic strengths to accomplish a task.) McGonigal says that by trying to have easy fun, we actually often wind up moving ourselves too far in the opposite direction. We go from stress and anxiety straight to boredom and depression. “We'd be much better off avoiding easy fun and seeking out hard fun, or hard work that we enjoy instead.”²⁹

The research proves what gamers already know: within the limits of our own endurance, we would rather work hard than be entertained. Perhaps that's why gamers spend less time watching television than anyone else on the planet. As Harvard professor and happiness expert Tal Ben-Shahar puts it, ‘we are much happier *enlivening* time rather than killing time.’³⁰

²⁵ Ibid. 49-50.

²⁶ Ibid. 115.

²⁷ Ibid. 28.

²⁸ Ibid. 31.

²⁹ Ibid. 32.

³⁰ Ibid. 32-3.

If nothing else, I think this insight into work, play and fun should embolden pastors to (lovingly!) demand much more from their congregations. If we are to be happy, we need good, hard work to do!

Conclusion: Some positive steps to promote Christian happiness

First of all, the overlap between at least some of the goals of positive psychology and those of Christianity, and therefore the usefulness to Christians of this new science of happiness, should be highlighted and celebrated in the church. For instance, McGonigal states that acts of kindness, and the attitude of gratitude are happiness activities, saying that these are the two most recommended prescriptions by positive psychologists for producing happiness.³¹

Making these points clear within the church could help to foster a greater spirit of mission and stewardship—making clear that even worldly science says doing good and being grateful are good for you. Plus, when it comes to gratitude, Christians have the added benefit of actually having an *object* for their gratitude—God! It certainly is a more basic expression of the logic of thankfulness to say thanks *to someone* rather than simply saying “I am thankful!” So Christianity definitely brings a salutary supplementation and correction to that aspect of the more secular promotion of happiness.

Secondly, the church needs to educate her members about how the Holy Spirit is manifested in the world, as seen especially in one of Wesley’s favorite scriptures: The “fruit of the Spirit” in Galatians 5:22-24. If we can get members to understand that we are meant for happiness, which comes from holiness, which is defined by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, then we can claim a deep affinity with, and connection to, the rest of humanity, even those who are seeking happiness in their lives through more secular means.

Thirdly, other exciting possibilities might open up if the church could start to see the Christian way of life as itself a kind of game. Think about Christianity in the context of video game theory:

- 1) There must be a *specific outcome* that the players will work toward in order to achieve a sense of *purpose*. In the case of Christianity, it is simply to become saints, to become holy, to be happily manifesting the fruit of the Spirit. This clear goal also names the clear “obstacle” to be overcome, which is necessary in the logic of any game. Simply put, the Christian’s main obstacle is sin, known by, among other markers, the “works of the flesh” named in Galatians 5:19-21.
- 2) A good game must have *rules that place limitations on how players can achieve the goal*, and scriptural passages like the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule can provide this guidance, as, of course, can a good liturgy;
- 3) The third defining trait of a good game is a *feedback system* which tells players how close they are to achieving the goal, and the Wesleyan vision of accountable *discipleship* would be indispensable for this, especially as found in a small group, a class or a band, or a spiritual director;

³¹ Ibid. 189

4) Finally, the fourth trait of a good game is *voluntary participation*, which requires that everyone is playing a game knowingly, and willingly accepts the goal, the rules, and the feedback. Claiming Methodism's beginning as a small, voluntary *Ecclesiola in Ecclesia*, coupled with Wesley's Arminian theology, makes the Methodist church a hospitable home for those who would freely seek to play the game of Christianity in this way.

"But," one might object, "Christianity is about *ultimate* and *serious* issues, not the trivialities of a video game." However, happiness and game theorists are showing that games are not trivial and can, in fact, promote serious energy expenditures for good—the "hard fun" or rewarding work that the gamers are seeking.

Remember that game designers are explicitly fostering games that:

- 1) provide satisfying work;
- 2) have with the hope of success;
- 3) can lead to social connectivity;
- 4) involve us in an activity that is larger than ourselves.

When properly undertaken in the context of a scripturally grounded, liturgically rich and socially active local congregation, church members can indeed grow to become happy and holy in such a game—if they choose to play according to the rules!

With regard to seeing the profound implications of regarding Christianity as a game, reflect on philosopher Bernard Suits' definition of a game, given above: *Playing a game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles*. It is unnecessarily hard, from a secular perspective, to live in a world where huge swathes of reality and human behavior are seen as "sinful." In many ways, Christians would have easier lives if they did without that unnecessary obstacle. In fact, unfortunately, many people—even some "Christians"—*do* opt for that easier life of not facing head-on the obstacle of sin. But Christianity calls us freely to accept that obstacle as something real in our lives, and to try to deal with it as guided by the Holy Spirit and within the limited scope of our finitude and our free will. Most of us want a sense of drama in our lives, yet we often overlook the drama that Christianity lays at our doorstep—the drama of dealing with the obstacle of sin!

Instead of trying to convince the world and ourselves, as many academics do, that the Christian way of life is somehow objectively true, metaphysically necessary and universally obvious, or easy, why not take a humbler approach and simply say this: "Here is a game that meets all the requirements of a good game. It is very challenging, and it cannot be played by yourself but, by the way, it leads to the life worth living. It leads to happiness and holiness."

Reclaiming Wesley's Method of Mimesis

One of the key lessons from Wesley that our current churches all-too-often ignore must be recovered in order to realize his vision of a happy and holy people. That is Wesley's emphasis on mimesis—seeing, hearing about, and imitating, real life examples of Christian living. This has a tremendous potential to powerfully complement the methods that our churches typically employ to make truly happy and holy disciples, such as sermons or Bible studies. I am not saying that those are dispensable or outmoded—but they can helpfully be *supplemented!*

This recovery of Wesley's method of mimesis can be fostered in a number of ways:

- bringing back recent confirmands ("ex-cons") to mentor current confirmands, having them talk about what living the Christian way of life has meant for them;
- promoting programs like the Lay Witness Mission and "The Walk to Emmaus," both of which rely on active laypeople speaking about their lives;
- re-instituting regular times of witness in worship services;
- using novels, and especially films, to portray how Christians actually live their lives and embody love, forgiveness, and the joy of service.

On this last point, I know from my own many years in the classroom that, for example, my showing of *Les Miserables* in my introductory college class on Christianity often has a longer-lasting effect on my students than our Bible studies, historical reflections and theological discussions of the creed.³² It is this special medium of film that has revolutionary possibilities for showing what true happiness actually looks like in the Christian way of life. Seeing Christian truths embodied in a real life can be even more vivid, and therefore convincing, today through film than it was through the verbal descriptions that Wesley had at his disposal through the printed medium of the *Arminian Magazine*³³

³² I use the non-musical version, starring Liam Neeson, Uma Thurman and Claire Danes. Seeing how Jean Valjean is transformed by the Bishop's covering of his sin, and then seeing the shape of Valjean's subsequent life—living a life of gratitude though selfless giving to Fantine, Cosette, Marius and others demonstrates how the Christian way of life, and all its fruit of the Spirit, is based on our being forgiven by the God who loves us just as we are. In short, we see in this story how sanctification *follows*, and does not *precede*, justification. Valjean, showing that highest expression of agape love---love of our enemy—even offers forgiveness and the chance for reconciliation to his *bête noir*, Javert, who has stalked him mercilessly over many years. That Javert ultimately refuses this offer of grace, and condemns himself to death, gives a powerful, realistic picture of how the Gospel is sometimes received in this world. Because we are free, we can say "no" to God and God's grace. And that choice has consequences.

³³ The number of options for helpful films is huge. Just a few examples would include films like *About a Boy* and *Groundhog Day*, which each show how when one stops thinking only about oneself and starts serving others that true happiness can come into our lives; *Gran Torino* on sin, forgiveness and sacrifice; *Pay it Forward*, on how gratitude should shape our lives; *Forrest Gump* on what effects a non-ironic, non-sarcastic life can have in our broken world; *Shawshank Redemption* and the power of hope; *Casablanca* on the need to order and prioritize our loves, as well as the sometimes pressing need to make sacrifices; *Hidden Figures* on the real-life story of overcoming racism; not to mention classics of what a good life looks like in a broken world, such as *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. There is a world of positive and inspiring resources out there on video now, if we will only use them!