

HOW TO RECOVER FROM ANEMIC WORSHIP:  
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND THE LOCAL CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

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**I. Prolegomena (3 Preliminary Issues):**

- A. **Introduction:** In one of my favorite pieces of writing by C. S. Lewis, "Meditation in a tool shed," this splendid author and thinker tells of an experience he once had:

I was standing today in the dark tool shed. The sun was shining outside and though the crack at the top of the door there came a sunbeam. From where I stood that beam of light, with the specks of dust floating in it, was the most striking thing in the place. Everything else was almost-pitch black. I was seeing the beam, not seeing things by it.

Then I moved, so that the beam fell on my eyes. Instantly the whole previous picture vanished. I saw no tool shed and (above all) no beam. Instead, I saw, framed in the irregular cranny at the top of the door, green leaves moving on the branches of a tree outside and beyond that, 90 odd million miles away, the sun. **Looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are very different experiences** [mine bold].<sup>2</sup>

1. When it comes to aesthetic experience and the local church, I will be focusing on the horizontal dimension- whereby I will be *looking at* church. But never forget that I am assuming a vertical dimension- aesthetic experience points us to God (following along).
  - a. **Looking at** (e.g., architect, colors, complexity, design, exposition or sermon, music, Scripture reading) is the horizontal).
  - b. **Following along** (God) is the vertical dimension.
  - c. Looking at and following along compliment one another.

For example, let's say I take my wife out for an evening. Even though my attention is focused on her (vertical), the object of my affections, thoughts, and desires, the food is horrible, the waiter is rude, and the ambience is poor (horizontal). I suspect those factors would overshadow, distract, or even

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<sup>1</sup> This outline is adapted from Paul R. Shockley, "Bridging the Culture Gap: How John Dewey's Aesthetics May Benefit the Local Church," (Ph.D. diss., Texas A&M University, 2010). Do not make copies of this presentation without the express permission of the author: [sumphutos@gmail.com](mailto:sumphutos@gmail.com). Copyright reserved.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.calvin.edu/~pribeiro/DCM-Lewis-2009/Lewis/meditation-in-a-toolshed.pdf>

inhibit what the date could have been-even with my wife being the object of my affections. In contrast, if the food is terrific, the waiter anticipates, meets, and exceeds in service, the ambience romantic... attention to detail is given at every juncture, the horizontal aspects of this date will contribute to experience I am having with my wife. Likewise, even though I come to worship God and Him alone (following along), horizontal aspects of (looking at) can contribute, distract, or even inhibit a dynamic and enriching experience worshipping Him (e.g., poorly constructed sermon; poor selection and use of music; excessive music; church design/interior decorations; precarious problems, mindless prayers; indifferent and rude people).

2. One of the most common and pervasive mistakes philosophers, theologians, and aestheticians commit is the fallacy of reductionism, namely, focusing on aspect of an object to the neglect of all other areas.
  - a. Example: The Nature of a flower. We commit this common fallacy if we only study the root, stems, leaves, and petals and fail to consider how the sunlight, soil, air, and water interact with the flower. Likewise, we commit the fallacy if we only study the vertical without considering the horizontal aspects of worship of the local church or the horizontal and not the vertical.
  - b. Interestingly and unfortunately, we have inherited the habit to analyze a situation or object by dissecting it into various parts. As a result, we tend to give more careful attention to the individual parts than the whole.
3. An extended outline is provided at [www.prshockley.org](http://www.prshockley.org). Look under the tab, "spiritual life" and the outline is located on the far left column.

## **II. A Confession of an Anemic Worshipper:**

- A. Throughout my journey as a believer I've all too often left evangelical corporate worship services malnourished. Discontent and frustrated, the corporate worship service did not stir my mind, heart, and will, improve or enrich my love-relationship with God in a meaningful way. Given the privilege and command to worship God and Him alone (vertical), realizing that worship is truly about Him, why do actual corporate worship experience falls short what it could be (horizontal)? In other words, why do they so often fail to qualitatively feed me? Yet in other areas of my life, I have very meaningful, nutritious experiences, ones that truly enhance my life qualitatively such as enjoying an evening listening to some live music with some dear friends, painting a canvas with oils, having a thought-provoking conversation with a bright student, working in my flower and

vegetable garden, hosting a dinner party, or meeting the practical needs of others. There is a certain irony here... for the one place where qualitative aesthetic experience should take place, that is, the church, is the one place I'm not experiencing it but in other areas of my I find aesthetic experiences to be plentiful.

- B. As a philosopher of aesthetics, one whose metaphysics, epistemology, and moral philosophy resonates in Augustine, Aquinas, Pascal, Thomas Reid, and Jonathan Edwards, I began an inquiry into this question and what I discovered enlarged my perspective of art-products, theology, and church life. My research, which will be published in a book, titled, *How to Recover from Anemic Worship*, led me to pinpoint some of my frustration and discontentment. Basically, my dissatisfaction revolves primarily around two related themes: (1) the nature of aesthetic experience *and* (2) how churches relate to the community in which they are imbedded.
- C. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of my work has led me to some penetrating observations but from a very unlikely source: the aesthetics of John Dewey (1859-1962). Though Dewey was a famous atheist, signer of the first *Humanist Manifesto*, and often described as the father of public modern education, his work in aesthetics is considered by many aesthetic philosophers (e.g. Monroe Beardsley) to be most formidable philosophical treatment of art and aesthetic experience in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The book is titled, *Art as Experience*.<sup>3</sup>
- D. Specifically in the area of philosophical aesthetics, Dewey stumbled upon something that is often ignored by the church but incredibly valued by people, namely, aesthetic experience. See, aesthetic experience, which can take place in any given activity, is a *divine gift* to both the believer and the unbeliever. We pursue and long for aesthetic experiences! We work our schedules around aesthetics experiences! We relish in them! It is not only a gift from God given to all alike, but it is also one that touches us in a world that is replete with personal and social deprivation, loneliness, loss, pain, and tragedy.
- E. Taking some of Dewey's insights I've been able to create a helpful tool of analysis when it comes to corporate worship services.
  - 1. A non-aesthetic experience occurs when any given activity is conducted in a manner that is humdrum, mechanical, and routine, or in a manner that is aimless, incoherent, and indulgent. Both extremes are enemies to aesthetic experience because they keep us from actively maintaining interest and finding satisfaction in our activities and practices.
  - 2. Irony also emerges here for all too often we become so accustomed to the humdrum that we end up looking to the sensational, the exaggerated, for relief. Or if we become accustomed to the

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<sup>3</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Berkeley Publishing, 1934, 1980, 2005).

exaggerated, then we will always need another over the top experience. While the event may be memorable with all of its “wow” factors, it leaves one anemic. Moreover, the sensational blinds us to everyday experiences. By looking for the sensational and using it as one’s measurement of what something ought to be, we miss the extraordinary in the ordinary details of daily living.

3. When it comes to worship services, I experience malnourishment when a worship service is either conducted in a manner that is mechanical, routine, and mindless, or one that is conducted in a manner that is random, disorganized, or disconnected. Whether the worship service is routine or random (disorganized), the worship experience tends to be forgettable, forgotten like a dream.
4. But the worship service also falls short of what it could be when there is either too little effort or too much effort; it leads us to a non-aesthetic experience. When we participate in a corporate worship service where either deficient engagement abounds or excessive, indulgent, and sensational engagement takes place, the experience falls short of qualitatively feeding me. Like riding a motorcycle, if the biker tilts too much to the left or too much to the right, a crash follows. For example, mechanical prayers, disinterested greetings or patronizing greetings, meaningless traditions or anti-traditions, disconnected Scripture readings or over the top readings, overused patterns of speech in sermons to indulgent to excessive, exploitive manipulation of emotions, all contribute to creating an experience that generates anemia.
5. On the other hand, aesthetic qualities can be expressed in the way we do church. The manner in which we care for the property, announce upcoming gatherings, and sing a hymn or praise song can have aesthetic qualities. *Why? Aesthetic experience is enlightening, intense, and memorable, involving active participation, perception, and appreciation.* When these moments occur, the given activity becomes a work of art. *A work of art* is found in the conduct of activities such as gardening, playing basketball, hemming a dress, or worshipping God in a corporate manner. Aesthetic experiences reflect artistic commitment. To be sure, aesthetic experiences can occur in everyday living, not just in a church service.

Consider the following two illustrations: The first is from everyday life and the second involves pastoral ministry:

6. Consider a car mechanic. We discover that there is a car mechanic is engaged in any given activity, interested in doing well, finding satisfactions in his handiwork, and caring for his materials and tools with genuine affection, the car mechanic is artistically engaged.<sup>4</sup> He takes all his past knowledge and experience and brings to bear on

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4.

fixing this vehicle. He sorts through the problems of working on this vehicle, solving them at each juncture with artistic engagement. Eventually the car transforms from being broken to being fixed. With each success, momentum culminates until the car is fixed. When the vehicle is fixed, there is an experience of satisfaction, a sense of fulfillment, and completion. This type of engagement sets him apart from other mechanics. Other mechanics fix cars in a disinterested, mindless way. A car is just another car. But then there are other mechanics who try to fix cars in a random, disorganized way. But not this person! He's in the experience and as he engages the vehicle, he is being fed and the vehicle is being changed. There is a bilateral relationship between the mechanic and the vehicle.

7. Consider pastoral ministry:

Let's say I seek to write a sermon, pray with others, or lead a communion service. I could pursue this activity mechanically with no keen interest or passion, or I could pursue this chaotically, without any order at all. Either choice is available to me. But either choice will be an unaesthetic experience. It could be a forgettable or a disastrous experience. On the other hand, if I intentionally pursue this task with the utmost concentration, devote my efforts to doing it well unto the Lord for His glory, find satisfaction at each juncture, and care for my material and reference tools with sincere respect, then I will be artistically engaged. Guided by purpose, I take what is an indeterminate situation and creatively work through each problem I encounter. What is interesting to discover is that a two-fold relational transaction is taking place. A doing and undergoing, a punctuated rhythm intakings and outgoings occur. Adjustment is taking place as I am affected by the conditions of the changing environment and the environment is being affected by my efforts. My emotions are building with each problem and each success (development). Eventually the experience culminates in a sermon that is defined by a single pervading quality with me exclaiming, "Wow, that is powerful!"

- F. Related to my concerns regarding the nature of aesthetic experience, is the relationship between the church and the community. Here, once again, I find myself perplexed in many ways. Some churches disregard community altogether, separating themselves unto themselves, whereas others seek to serve community, but strictly on the pastors' terms. Then there are churches that attempt to attract community to their location by using entertainment. But the worship service is nothing more than an eye-catching but cheap finish applied to rich wood. While I have found churches that contextualize their ministries to a particular subculture, so many I have experienced fail to contend for the truth as disclosed from Scripture. They compromise and do not become all that God calls them to be.

## II. Four Examples of Anemic Worship Experiences:

- A. While there are thousands of evangelical churches that are healthy, revolve their lives around Scripture, promote aesthetic experiences in their activities, and actively engage the community in meaningful ways (salt and light), I would like to draw upon four real churches that serve to illustrate common aesthetic problems in many unhealthy churches.
- B. What we might discover in these unhealthy churches is that their worship services generate non-aesthetic experiences, falling short of what they could because of imbalance. Imbalance finds expression in at least four major ways:
1. An imbalance finds expression when churches conduct their worship service in a non-aesthetic manner that is routine or random.
  2. An imbalance occurs when an activity is conducted in a deficient or excessive manner.
  3. When churches separate themselves from community or absorb community, they lose themselves. As a result, they become deficient or excessive in meeting the practical, educative, social, and spiritual needs of the whole person, offering a distinctive and authentic testimony to the community.
  4. This imbalance also finds expression when the fallacy of reductionism is committed. The fallacy of reductionism is focusing on one aspect of worship to the neglect of all others. An illustration may be helpful.
    - a. If I were to study the nature of a flower, I commit this fallacy by only focusing on the root, stems, leaves, and flower. In order to understand the nature of a flower, I need to also study such things as how the sunlight, air, soil, and water interact with the flower in order to really understand the nature of a flower. Likewise, churches commit reductionism by focusing on one activity to the neglect of others.
- C. *Four Problem Churches where malnourishment occurs.* To be sure, the four churches I examine are real churches. To be sure, there can be a mixture or blending among the four types. Moreover, the list is not complete or exhaustive. But this list can be helpful in considering how to recover from anemic worship:
1. *The Elite Church* promotes a singular aesthetic that is exclusively reserved for their members.
  2. *The Broken Church* promotes a more rounded aesthetic but has separated or divorced itself from community. Unfortunately, this church will typically find itself merely subsisting if not dying.

3. *The Humdrum Church* ignores the aesthetic, for its members are preoccupied with the routine and are afraid of change. Its worship service is anemic. As a result, it does not meaningfully contribute to culture (salt and light) especially since culture is always in flux. The church is, for the most part, immobilized by the unknown and prejudiced by the familiar. Why is the routine non-aesthetic? There is no curiosity, no suspense, and no movement through a connected series of qualities. The music, prayers, exposition, children lessons, and the interior decorations do not qualitatively change and contribute to one another. There is no tension. There is only mechanical connection. As a result, there is no active interplay of rhythm, imagination, and unity. There are no forces carrying these qualities to a decisive moment in one's life to produce an organic moment of aesthetic consummation.
4. *The Sensational Church* promotes a non-nutritious aesthetic, one that is characterized by indulgence. As a result, while this type of church may tantalize or allure people, it fails to meet one's real needs (e.g., longing for truth). People leave anemic. Churches like these tend to have a high turn over rate.

### III. A Closer Look at Four Types of Problem Churches:

- A. **The Elite Church:** While the elite church offers a singular activity where aesthetic experiences could occur, typically, the teaching of Scripture, it fails to recognize the non-aesthetic imbalance that results from its form of didactic teaching. Combined with the fallacy of reductionism by focusing on this one activity, and reserving this singular aesthetic for its privileged members, the gap between this local church and community continues to widen as culture changes.
  1. *Strength:* Enriching aesthetic activity can take place in the dissemination of and response to Scripture in the life of the member. When the Bible lesson is constructed and delivered in a certain way that people walk away from that lesson and claim that the church service was "powerful." If connections are made, then experience can be memorialized.
  2. *Problems:*
    - a. *The Problem of Reductionism:* Singular focus is on expositional teaching while neglecting other relevant areas: interpersonal relationships, corporate fellowship, and opportunities of corporate service.
    - b. *Didactic Pedagogy Problem:* 1) Pastor actively (excessive doing) proclaims but congregation passively receives (deficient receiving). There is deficient receiving from the pastor and deficient doing from the congregation. Pastor and congregation are impoverished by interaction. 2) Singular

focus. There is no room for error because there is no other aesthetic focus. No other activity is taken seriously. It is all too easy for a pastor to rely on his past experiences, memory, training and the loyalty of his congregation, and as a result, the pastor may construct and conduct his sermon in a manner that is non-mechanical.

c. *Culture Gap between Church and Community:*

1. Church restricts accessibility to the community (e.g., technical jargon).
2. Structure of church worship service is inflexible with singular focus on the receiver's mind.
3. Structure of the church becomes static in its art-forms whereas culture continues to change.
4. Neglects the importance of other activities (e.g., opportunities to develop interpersonal relationships).

3. *Evaluation:*

- a. Recognize the value of other activities of aesthetic experience without neglecting the present one.
- b. Avoid of the fallacy of reductionism by focusing on one activity to the neglect of others (e.g., fellowship gatherings, small group discussions, testimonies; creative use of the arts, pastoral interactions, and enablement of lay leaders).
- c. Promote interpersonal relationships where community, personal differences, and continuities are valued among its people.
- d. Seek to serve the community, promoting organic activities that will increase awareness of the relationship to the church and the community which will lead to practical benefits for all involved.

**B. The Broken Church:** Largely traditional, this church possesses one of the most valuable strengths any church community could possess, namely, intimate relationships. The teaching in each setting is usually delivered in an engaging and nutritious manner. Unfortunately, this church is overwhelmed by a problem that cannot be overcome by the loving relationships or substantive teaching, namely, separation from community at large. As a result of this closed-minded mindset, this church will be ignored by the greater community in which the church is embedded. The church will degenerate whereby it will merely subsist or die.

1. *Strengths:* Aesthetic experiences repeatedly occur within the church in view of important relationships made among the church families. From the young to the old, old families are involved in each other's lives. From those relationships, families are helped and strengthened, resources are shared, and individual as well as corporate growth occurs. Moreover, these relationships generate a shared value of communication which can possess aesthetic qualities. For example, they are able to be genuine with each other, accept each other's oddities, interests, and issues. They value the harmony of differences that make up their congregation. In other words, they prize a balance between their differences and continuities. In that balance rhythm and shared growth find expression. While the exposition of Scripture each Sunday is didactic in nature, opportunities naturally come about to discuss the message and communicate with the pastor.
  
2. *Problems:*
  - a. *Separation from Community.* These types of churches are broken and possibly unable to recover from its disconnection from the greater community. To some extent the church leadership is ignorant of the relationship between the members and the environment. While they may be a close-knit family, they fail to understand what it means to be salt and light because members will typically ask rhetorical questions like, "Why should we bring people into the church when we are happy with the church as it is?" Moreover, the larger community is, for the most part, ignorant of the church and its opportunities. While relational friendship is one of the deepest human needs, there is no strategic method of communicating to the society that this church could offer an answer to that need. Thus, the separation from community has been central to its lack of health. But the nature of this separation is multifaceted:
    1. Church will relocate if demographics change.
    2. Diplomatically set the church apart in order to protect its governing structure and membership.
    3. Do not reach out to its neighborhood in an organized, meaningful way.
    4. Governmental leadership structure is an obstacle to change (e.g., unanimous vote by deacons or elders).
  
  - b. *A Failure to Take Advantage of the Obvious.* Church leadership does not typically see its unwillingness to embrace the community as an obstacle to growth.

3. *Evaluation:*
- a. If church is separated from community too long, the church will either break or merely subsist.
  - b. The church will become forgotten by community.
  - c. Church neglects the value of the greater community.
  - d. If the church is facing this type of problem, then realizing that it is out of step with the march of its environment is an important, critical step.
  - e. Recovery, if obtained, may lead to organic growth.
  - f. If the church will find creative and meaningful ways to embrace and relate to its diverse neighborhood, the church's situation will likely improve.
  - g. But the church must realize that change is a constant, both within and beyond its walls (e.g., membership changes, personal turmoil, death, and new experiences). Therefore, the church needs to understand its own state and relationship to the community. Like a Bedouin nomad who guides his animals in the desert wilderness, the leadership must be willing to adjust properly to tension, whether sudden or a buildup over time.

If we examine the elite church and broken church together, we are able to glean the following insights. While both churches can have in particular instances activities with aesthetic quality, they both tend to suffer from isolation or separation from community, which is not conducive to having the most enriching aesthetic experiences. Both churches place restrictions on outsiders, but in a different way. The elite church demands that people adapt themselves to the pastor's didactic style and authority. The broken church separates itself in an effort to be culturally homogeneous and protective of its families. These 'unwritten' mores can be unaesthetic because they can restrict natural or organic church development. In fact, when a church has too many or too little customs, rules, or order, it can be difficult for organic aesthetic experience to emerge. While the broken church succeeds in personal relationships, it has chosen not to corporately and actively participate in community. Sadly, it appears that this separation between church and community might cost the church its corporate existence. While the leadership and members of these churches may be affording themselves aesthetic occurrences, they are not ones that lend themselves to further potential aesthetic connections to the community.

- C. The Humdrum Church:** This type of church is to be commended for its fellowship among its members. It is to be extolled for its willingness to think beyond its own needs. Notwithstanding, the church's worship service champions the routine. Unfortunately, familiarity induces inactivity,

indifference, and apathy. With no force carrying aesthetic qualities to a decisive moment of consummation, consequently, the church worship service becomes normative in the life of the church. Qualitative impoverishment is the result and every service is forgettable. Though its members may become aware of a culture gap between the church and the changing community, all that can be offered to the community is rather mundane and colorless.

1. *Strengths:* With its mature audience, the church typically has many relationships that are able to withstand the test of time and are able to grow deep into abiding relationships. Hugs are shared liberally and visitors, though infrequent, are made to feel welcome. Deep conversations, the meeting of practical needs, and sincere encouragement from friends often lead them to aesthetic experiences.
2. *Problems:* Problem of the routine. In every possible way, the church's worship service follows the same mechanical format or order every week. This non-aesthetic mechanical nature of the church's worship service involves several factors:
  - a. Leadership and members are fearful of change:
    1. Change is emotionally and physically difficult.
    2. Church embraces the personality of the pastor.
    3. Resistance is treated as an obstruction not an invitation to reflection.
    4. While changes may be taken seriously, the potential unrest it would cause outweighs the possibilities.
  - b. Security is found in regularity:
    1. Same church order of service.
    2. Clock governs decision-making.
    3. Same songs and prayers are habitually and regularly offered.
    4. Risks are avoided.
  - c. Familiarity is valued over creativity.
    1. Members are untapped resources: unused, unexposed, or unable to be given a platform.
    2. Involvement with the unknown is too risky.
    3. Creativity is stifled.
    4. Same people do the same jobs.
    5. Sing the same songs.
    6. Play the same instruments.

- d. Fear of change generates alienation. If someone visits the church, like the elite church, he or she must conform to one way of doing things.
- e. Very little room for a life-changing experience. Because the worship service is done in a very mechanical way, there is little room for someone's life to be touched deeply, that is, enraptured in an aesthetic moment. Should they be touched by the music or the sermon, it is interpreted as highly emotional, unwarrantedly mystical, and intellectually pointless. Thus, an aesthetic moment that may be found is better kept to oneself. No part of this sacred hour can be corrupted by the unpredictable nature of people.
- f. Church's aesthetic is constructed in such a way that is non-nutritive to those in its sphere of influence. While the worship service brings the past to the present, there is no anticipation, that is, no vision for something new in the worship service. No element of experimentation to the church's aesthetics or openness to new ideas is encouraged. Instead, new ideas are met with the refusal to change. While its repudiation to adapt to a more spontaneous and dynamic setting may be vacuous to some members, the leadership is willing to accept that over the possibility of losing other members who are enraged by a slight modification. The church is, for the most part, immobilized by the unknown and prejudiced by the familiar.

3. *Analysis:*

- a. Church needs to rethink its position on change.
- b. Look at risk from a different perspective.
- c. Though change for change sake is not profitable, change to meet a growing need is natural and necessary for growth.
- d. If "heels" are stubbornly dug into the ground for too long, the church will find it no longer has a place within the ever-changing community.
- e. Incorporating objects of art can be used to assist in changing the worship service from inactivity to active engagement.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dewey writes:

Art throws off the covers that hid the expressiveness of experienced things; it quickens us from the slack of routine and enables us to forget ourselves by finding ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world about us in its varied qualities and forms. It intercepts every shade of expressiveness found in objects and orders them in a new experience of life.

**D. Sensational Church:** Often in reaction to non-aesthetic routines that typify many worship services, many pursue churches that emphasize the sensational, and by this I mean promoting a worship experience that not only attracts a great deal of interest, but also overwhelms the senses. But like the humdrum church, this church champions a non-aesthetic experience that is not beneficial.

1. *Prefatory Remarks:*

- a. Sensational church is preoccupied with indulgence in activities.
- b. Sensational church is overly focused on excessive undergoing (receptivity), crowding as many fanciful impressions as possible into one event.
- c. The excessive undergoing overwhelms the senses and captivate the emotions, causing people to hunger for the sensational rather than balance in experience. When people are called to publicly respond to the worship experience, then all of a sudden, the excessive undergoing dramatically shifts to excessive doing. In other words, the roles are now reversed. Here the audience's doing is governed, that is, now informed by their undergoing. As a result, the pastor and worship team receives excessive undergoing and deficient doing. Just as the humdrum's worship service is engrossed with the non-aesthetic routine, the sensational church is preoccupied with the indulgent and is thus, imbalanced.

2. *Strengths:*

- a. People in this church are quick to respond to crises in community.
- b. Sensitive to racial tensions and gender issues by emphasizing unity.
- c. Tend to be socially and politically involved in public protests, strive against vices in the community, and support public officials.
- d. Church embraces technological changes, welcoming technological revolutions, assimilating new advances into the worship experience.
- e. Music is performed brilliantly.

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Because the objects of art are expressive, they communicate. I do not say that communication to others is the intent of an artist. But is the consequence of his work-which indeed lives only in communication when it operates in the experience of others [Ibid., 108].

3. *Problem of Imbalance:*

- a. Worship service tilts to the excessive and the focus centers on the audience experiencing and indulging in the sensational, namely, saturating the audience with sensations in order to generate an emotional response. Then suddenly, the focus dramatically changes from the excessive in receiving to excessive in responding to the service before others.
- b. The aesthetics of a sensational church is cut short from maturation because what is valued is an emotional response from the congregation. The loud music, the use of colorful lights, the emotional rhetoric, the sentimental words, and the use of technology are choreographed to provoke people to respond. Like a pep rally, the music begins very upbeat and is excitable and slowly builds up to a crescendo through the use of rhetoric and music, targeting felt needs, desires, and dreams. The crescendo is followed by an emotional release. Thus, the emotional release becomes the overriding goal of the sensational church and entertainment, that is, using various means to hold our attention, is the means to provoke this response.
- c. *Problem of Reductionism:* All aspects are focused on the build up of emotions to the neglect of other areas of personhood (e.g., mind). Also expository teaching, church history, and systematic theology are displaced. Leadership tends to downplay the importance of the mind in favor of “heart knowledge.” There is a focus on the subjective aspects of the Christian experience divorced from critical thinking, deliberating, and judging.
- d. *Problem of Emotional Indulgence:* When we are overwhelmed by our passions, there is no balance or order; there is no appropriate dignity that enriches the whole person (e.g., collapsing on floor; howling like dogs).
- e. *Problem of Artificial Experience of Indulgence:* Is technology being used to entertain or manipulate people or is it contributing to the development of the experience within the environment? Just like the instruments of a movie theatre are adjusted appropriately to bring a target response, we must examine the purposes of technology and see how it might be better used to promote an organic aesthetic experience and not induce a simulation, a fabricated activity upon the congregation that merely overwhelms the senses and affects the emotions. All too often we can think we are having an aesthetic experience when it is one that is only simulated. This is a terrible problem because the values of aesthetic experience are being confused, if not displaced in some churches, by excessive entertainment. Like a narcotic drug, we can so easily become addicted to

entertainment that we long for more of that indulgence, which is not healthy, than we do for organic aesthetic experiences. It is not a difficult step to become desensitized and even bored over time as a result of too much exposure to indulgent entertainment. Therefore, we should not only inquire into proportionality, but critically examine the role of technology in relationship to the end-results. Is technology balanced with substantive learning? Is there proper doing and undergoing in view of technology and the senses? Stated differently, if there was a power outage, is an aesthetic experience even possible?

- f. *Indulgence Generates Suspicion Among Community:* The building may be huge, the music loud, the lights flashy, the images colorful, the suits sleek, and the preacher's proclamations energetic, but in the end, the aesthetics are devoid of nutritional content because the pastor and his team primarily sought to tap into the emotions, not the whole person. As a result, their aesthetic indulgences generate suspicions in the community because they manipulate the emotions in attempt to motivate genuine life-change. Other pastors merely seek to entertain and reinforce "positive" and "non-disturbing ideas." Still others use entertainment as an element of control. Expectations by the church leadership, such as financial giving in order to be blessed by God, even lead some to mock the church, fostering greater alienation between the church and community, even in spite of the fact that the church strives to serve the community. Though it strives to be relevant, this type of church is qualitatively anemic.

4. Analysis:

1. Aim for balance in both doing and receiving, appropriately engaging the whole person within a setting that does not contribute to excessiveness in worship.
2. Leadership should not *depend* upon electronic devices, loud music, and visual stimuli as being *necessary* to have an aesthetic experience. Rather, pause and look around and experience wonder, delight, and zeal in the ordinary activities, events, and scenes of life.
3. Do not ignore how tension and pain can contribute to aesthetic experience. Dewey writes:

Struggle and conflict may themselves be enjoyed, although they are painful, when they are experienced as means of developing an experience; members in that they carry it forward, senses, in every experience. There is... an element of undergoing, of suffering in its large sense, in every experience. Otherwise there would be no taking in of what preceded. For 'taking in' in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness

over what was previously unknown. It involves reconstruction which may be particularly painful. Whether the necessary phase is by itself pleasurable or painful is a matter of particular conditions.<sup>6</sup>

- E. Overall comments:** Using Dewey's analysis of what is and what is not aesthetic, we are able to uncover aesthetic problems that many churches face. In each of these cases studied, actions and consequences are not joined together in appropriate balance. This imbalance finds expression when the routine or sensational are valued above harmony between what we do and what we receive. As a result, aesthetic experiences are cut short from maturation. Moreover, these imbalances promote a cultural gap between the church and community because, in part, the church is not able to offer substantive aesthetic enrichment to everyone in the larger society in which it is embedded. Therefore, coupled with excesses and deficiencies, the elite, broken, humdrum and sensational churches aggravate the cultural gap between the church and community. But in turn, the gap also impacts the members themselves. It has caused frustrated people to break away from church and ways of doing church. Many are disillusioned and unfulfilled. As a result, movements such as "seeker-sensitive," "emerging," and "emergent" churches have found significant expression.

#### **IV. How to Recover from Anemic Worship: Be a "Live" Church:**

- A.** Come to an adequate understanding of aesthetic experience and what generates non-aesthetic experiences. Outside of the church walls people have aesthetic experiences as they go about their daily lives in such areas as cooking, employment, gardening, hobbies, recreation, and sporting events. The local church should be no exception. Be all there: Artistic engagement unto the glory of God in each and every activity of worship!
1. Examine and reflect upon what connects one moment of experience to another for we often go from one activity to another without any integral momentum. What is the pervading unity that captures the total worship experience?
  2. How is the means fused with the ends, the medium with the meaning, and the part with whole?
  3. Consider how relationships of experience link past to the present experience. Is experience disconnected from the week before? Does the church leadership, for example, review what event or activity was fruitful and what not?
  4. How does one aspect of the service, connect, contribute, and integrally relate to one another? While the leadership may attempt to provide some "thematic connection" such as ensuring the theme or title of certain songs match the central homiletical point of the sermon, aesthetic connectivity and integral momentum are

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 42.

neglected. People walk into the sanctuary. The church goes through the program and they leave. As a result, the worship experience is dead by routine. These churches drift along as the culture around them continues to change.

5. But if we were to integrate all the strengths of these churches examined, and artistically and appropriately employ them unto the glory of God, with appropriate doing and undergoing, ever so careful to avoid imbalance (e.g., excessive/deficient; mechanical; disorganized), then I suggest that the aesthetic activities, practices, and rituals are likely to come “alive” and be very meaningful for those involved.
- B. Use the resources of previous experiences as tools to engage the church’s present condition. No matter how negative or positive, use past lessons, appropriately applying them in the present experience in order to cultivate benefits for all involved. The live church will never abandon or forsake its own past even if a certain era of history becomes unpopular (e.g., modernism).
- C. Like a deer in the forest, be observant of the church’s context and relationship to its surroundings. The live church “watches” what stirs about, and the church, too, is stirred. The live church looks and listens, consciously engages and appropriately withdraws when in danger. The live church does not hide, run away from, or separate itself from the community in which it is embedded.
- D. Integrate the architecture, fellowship, instruction, music, prayer, and other activities. All aspects are carefully examined to see how they might organically relate to the sum-total of the worship service.
- E. Don’t merely see art-products (e.g., architecture, candles, communion table, flowers, digital imagery, pulpit, etc) as mere physical objects. Instead, study how these art-products relate to and contribute to having a meaningful, enriching aesthetic experience. In other words, how do art-products contribute to present experience? Do the art-products expand our lives in beneficial ways? Do we merely look at the art-products or do we follow them along to the God of the Bible (cf. C. S. Lewis’ “Meditation of a Tool Shed”)
- F. Be “incarnational.” Do not merely satisfy people’s desires, inclination, and preferences. Realize that every lack is also a demand, a reaching out. So, the live church should seek to focus on the deep needs in order to be relevant in any given generation. While culture may change, people still have the same existential needs.
- G. Embrace “adjustment” as a core aesthetic value. The live church will continue to examine, review, and critique its results. As a result of constant inquiry, the live church will always strive to fine-tune its activities, knowing that these adjustments will affect both the church and the community.

Therefore, the live church will be in a better position to offer an experience that is personally meaningful to each generation.

- H. Like a potter shapes his clay with attentive care, insight, and creativity, taking what he has learned in the past and applying it into the present situation with a certain anticipation and hope in mind, churches should involve their attendees in the processes of the church whereby they take ownership of church activities. In those activities where appropriate energetic doing and undergoing is able to take place, and both relate to each other in an integral way unto completion, the experiences for all involved will be marked by “aliveness.”
- I. *Generate an aesthetic legacy.* There was a time Christians encouraged and produced art-products that had very powerful effects on society. History has also shown when art-products are done poorly, aesthetic impoverishment results. If enduring art-products are isolated from common life, aesthetic hunger in people and are likely to lead people to embrace art-products that contribute to cultural degeneration. But if local churches will realize the bilateral relationship they have with or to the communities in which they are embedded, the opportunity lies before them to create art-products that will not only contribute to the present society, but also leave an aesthetic legacy for generations to come.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> In his Gifford Lecture series, William Temple makes an interesting statement:

It takes a considerable time for a secure aesthetic judgment to be formed, and with regard to contemporary art there is much debate. But when a common judgment is reached after long periods of discussion, it is secure as scientific theories never are. Many may be uncertain in this second quarter of the twentieth century about the aesthetic rank of Epstein as a sculptor or T.S. Eliot as a poet. But there is no serious dispute about Pheidias or Aeschylus, about Giotto, or Piero, or Botticelli, about Velasquez or Rembrandt, about Dante or Shakespeare. No doubt I 'date' myself by the precise list which I select; Beethoven to Bach; but every name thus mentioned is securely established in the list of Masters; and the actual works of the earliest touch us now they touched the hearts of those who knew them first.... It takes longer for the aesthetic judgment to become stable than for the scientific, but when it reaches stability it also achieves finality as the other does not" [*Nature, Man, and God* (Macmillan, 1956), 158-9].