

WHAT DO THE ARTS HAVE TO DO WITH THEOLOGY?
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE, THE ARTS, & THE LOCAL CHURCH

By Paul R. Shockley
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I. THE NATURE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES:

A. The Pursuit of Nourishing Aesthetic Experiences in Everyday living:

In philosophical aesthetics one of the central issues explored is the nature of aesthetic experience, namely, a particular event whereby the agent is personally affected by a particular art-product. Though the historical survey of the philosophical nature of aesthetic experience finds its first critical expression in the work of Plato, and its enigmatic nature explored and debated all throughout its history, what philosophers do know is that aesthetic experiences do occur. Aesthetic experiences are memorialized in our minds, they stir our affections, and offer enriching moments that nourish our human experience as life is lived. In fact, we long for aesthetic experiences! We work our schedules around aesthetics experiences! We relish in them! Aesthetic experiences are not only a gift from God given to all alike, they also touch us in a world that is replete with personal and social deprivation, loneliness, loss, pain, and tragedy.

Moreover, we have discovered in our daily activities that these nutritious aesthetic experiences not only take place when observing art-products (e.g., concert halls, galleries, and natural scenes), but also in everyday activities such as enjoying an evening listening to some live music with some dear friends, having a thought-provoking conversation with a bright student, working in a vegetable garden, hosting a dinner party, or meeting the practical needs of others. When these experiences take place, they nourish our lives, infect our comings and goings, and enlarge our understanding about ourselves and our situational setting.

B. The Problem of Aesthetic Anemia in the Local Church:

Nevertheless, in a 2010 study of the worship services of four different evangelical churches, one common theme emerged, namely, the failure of the congregations to experience qualitative and robust aesthetic experiences.¹ In other words, people were leaving evangelical worship services aesthetically malnourished. Discontent and frustrated, the corporate worship experience did not stir their whole person and improve or enrich their love-relationship with God in a meaningful way. Yet, these same people have aesthetic experiences that nourish them in activities *outside* of their local church (e.g., playing sports; hobbies; fixing cars).

¹ 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. Copyright reserved 2011 ©

Therefore, the question is posed: 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 fall short what it could be (horizontal)? In other words, why do worship services so often fail to qualitatively “feed” those who attend? There is a certain irony here... for the one place where nourishing aesthetic experience should take place, that is, the local church, is the one place many people are not experiencing it, but in other daily areas of my life, they have discovered aesthetic experiences to be plentiful.

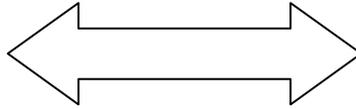
C. Three Sources of Aesthetic Anemia in the Local Church:

Though there may be other factors at work (e.g., diversions and habitual sins and fleshly tendencies), in the area of aesthetics, this study revealed that aesthetic anemia emerged when the fallacy of reductionism was committed in the local worship service, the functional use of the arts were ignored, and the activity of worship was conducted in a manner that the experience of worshipping God fell short of what it could have been.

1. The fallacy of reductionism was committed when a congregation focused on one object or activity to the neglect of all other related aspects. Thus, in the context of worship services, there was a tendency to focus on one aspect of worship (e.g., singing of songs) to the neglect of all other expressions of worship (e.g., expositional proclamation of Scripture).
2. The functional use of the arts is the notion that art products can serve certain important ends.² This study revealed the arts were not used in such a way that nourishing aesthetic experiences occurred unto the glory of God. Instead, the robust use of the arts was intentionally or unintentionally ignored.
3. Related, the activity of worship was conducted in a manner that was non-aesthetic. Stated differently, an aesthetic experience did not take place when a worship experience was directed in a mechanical, routine, and mindless way or was organized in a random, disorganized, or disconnected manner. Thus, it was concluded that both activities are enemies to aesthetic experiences.

² The functional (useful) use vs. non-functional art debate that historically found expression began in the Renaissance. In essence, the functional view takes two forms: normative functionalism and descriptive functionalism. Normative functionalism is the idea that an art product ought always to serve a specific function (e.g., imitate the “Forms”; Aristotle’s cathartic effects; Tolstoy’s notion of the role of morality). When the art-product fails to serve its specific function, it is aesthetically judged poorly. Descriptive functionalism is the view that all art-products will serve a particular function (e.g., cultural, metaphysical, or psychological) regardless of the artist’s knowledge or intentions (e.g., Karl Marx’s view that arise out of economic interests and are used to support or advance those pursuits). On the other hand, non-functional view of the arts is the idea that art is produced for the sake of art alone [David Novitz, “Function of Art” in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, Blackwell Companions to Philosophy, edited by David E. Cooper (Malden, MA.: Blackwell, 1992, 1995), 162-67.

Activity conducted in mechanical, mindless manner.



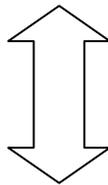
Activity conducted in a disorganized, chaotic, or random manner.

Interestingly, three other factors also emerged in this four-fold case study regarding aesthetic anemia in three different ways.

1. Because people were hungry for aesthetic experiences in their local churches, some attempted to find relief in the sensational and the exaggerated. Interestingly, when they become accustomed to the exaggerated, these congregants developed the impulse or need for more sensational experiences. While those dramatic experiences may have been memorable with all of their “wow” factors, it still left them anemic.
2. The pursuit of the sensational also blinded some of them to the experiential richness found in everyday living. Thus, by looking for the sensational and using it as one’s measurement of what something ought to be, they missed the extraordinary in the ordinary details of daily living.
3. Third, others proactively displaced the value of traditional expressions of the arts in favor of avant-garde ideas or the pursuit of the cheap and vulgar.

Additionally, the enemies of aesthetic experiences were not only expressed when a worship activity was conducted in a manner that was routine or chaotic. Worship services also fell short of what they could have been when there was either too little effort or too much effort (doing/activity) or excessive or deficient response from the environment (undergoing/effects). Stated differently, when people participated in a corporate worship service, where either deficient engagement was expressed or excessive, indulgent, and sensational engagement took place, the experience fell short of qualitatively nourishing them. 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 have contributed to creating an experience that generated aesthetic anemia.

Excessive or Deficient Doing



Excessive or deficient undergoing

D. Summary:

In sum, aesthetic anemia found expression when worship services took place in an imbalanced way. Imbalance emerged in at least three major ways:

1. When church services were conducted in a non-aesthetic manner that was routine or random.
2. When church services were conducted in a deficient or excessive manner.
3. This imbalance also found expression when the fallacy of reductionism committed by not proactively integrating the arts into the worship service whereby the whole person may be directed to a holistic worship of God.

E. Relationship to Community:

Lastly, one additional observation needs to be mentioned as a result of this four-fold case study. When churches excluded or separated themselves from the community or absorbed the community, they lost their distinctiveness within the community. By separating themselves from the community the church lost the opportunity to be “salt” and “light” in the community. As a result, they declined not only in impact, but also in other areas such as growth and the fresh exercise of creativity. When the church absorbed the community and become indistinguishable from the greater community, their distinctiveness also faded. As a result of their choice, these types of churches became deficient, failing to offer a distinctive testimony to the community that stands unique among others. In fact, one of the churches studied, ceased to exist all together because of their exclusion from community.

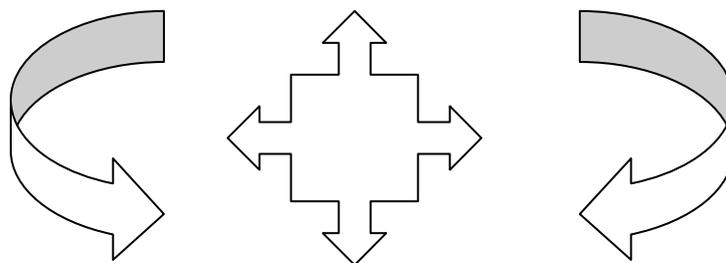
II. The Value of Artistic Commitment:
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A. One Solution: Prize Artistic Commitment:

The problem of aesthetic anemia in the local church can be addressed if the arts are used in worship activities in such a way that art-products and activities enrich and not hinder congregational worship of the God of the Bible. Though some general practical steps will be suggested in the conclusion, one particular solution needs to be discussed before the examination of the churches takes place for it will assist us in our understanding of this 2010 analysis. In essence, local churches need to prize artistic commitment. One can have aesthetic, enriching worship services if worship activities are pursued with artistic commitment to the glory of God. What this study discovered is that for *aesthetic experiences to occur that are enlightening, intense, and memorable, one must actively participate, perceive, and appreciate worship activities with their whole person.* In other words, one must actively engage in the worship of God just as a deer uses all of its senses to engage its surroundings. When these moments occur, the given activity, and in this case, our worship becomes a work of art unto the Lord. To be sure, *a work of art* is found in other conduct of activities such as gardening, playing basketball, or hemming a dress. But worshipping God in a manner that values artistic commitment translates the activity into a work of art because the believer is engaging God in a qualitative manner.

Aesthetic experience:

Appropriate Doing and Undergoing: Artistic Commitment to Qualitative Activity



B. Two Examples:

Two examples might suffice in explaining the process. The first example draws from the everyday experience of a car mechanic. The latter example involves activities drawn from pastoral ministry. By using both illustrations the relationship between aesthetic experiences that occur outside and inside of the local church are emphasized.

1. *The 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. He takes all his past knowledge and experience and brings to bear on 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 is 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.
2. *Pastoral ministry.* A pastor seeks to write a sermon, pray with others, or lead a communion service. He could pursue this activity mechanically with no keen interest or passion or he could pursue this chaotically, without any order at all. Either choice is available to him. But either choice will be an unaesthetic experience. In fact, it could be a forgettable (routine) or a disastrous experience (disorganized). On the other hand, if he were to intentionally pursue this task with the utmost concentration, devote his

efforts to doing it well unto the Lord for His glory, find satisfaction at each juncture, and care for his material and reference tools with sincere respect, then he will be artistically engaged. Guided by purpose, he will take what is an indeterminate situation and creatively work through each problem he encounters with tender care. 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 he is affected by the conditions of the changing environment and the environment is being affected by my efforts. His emotions are building with each problem and each success (development). Eventually the experience culminates in an experience that is defined by a single pervading quality with me exclaiming, "Wow, that is powerful!"

Now having explained aesthetic anemia that emerges from the fallacy of reductionism and non-use or negligence of the arts, let us now turn to four examples of anemic worship experiences as reflected in four real churches.

III. Introduction to the Case-Study of Four Evangelical Churches:

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), the four real churches examined serve to illustrate common aesthetic problems in many unhealthy churches. To be sure, there can be a mixture or blending among the four types. Moreover, the observations discussed here are not complete or exhaustive. However, they do orient us to the problem of aesthetic anemia and will help us to better address how the arts can be used to help the local church. In sum:

- A. *The Elite Church* promotes a singular aesthetic that is exclusively reserved for their members. Unfortunately, they commit the fallacy of reductionism by neglecting all aspects of the arts other than the exegetical teaching of Scripture and theological doctrine. The result is that everything depends upon the exegesis and homiletics of the preacher and the receptivity of the audience.
- B. *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.
- C. *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.

- D. *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 into the Four Churches Examined:

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.

A. 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.

B. Problems:

1. *The Problem of Reductionism:* Singular focus is on expositional teaching while neglecting other relevant areas: interpersonal relationships, corporate fellowship, and opportunities of corporate service.
2. *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.
3. *Culture Gap between Church and Community:*
 - a. Church restricts accessibility to the community (e.g., technical jargon).
 - b. Structure of church worship service is inflexible with singular focus on the receiver's mind.
 - c. Structure of the church becomes static in its art-forms whereas culture continues to change.

- d. Neglects the importance of other activities (e.g., opportunities to develop interpersonal relationships).
4. *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.

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.

A. *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.

B. *Problems:*

1. *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:

2. *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.
 - a. Church will relocate if demographics change.
 - b. Diplomatically set the church apart in order to protect its governing structure and membership.
 - c. Do not reach out to its neighborhood in an organized, meaningful way.
 - d. Governmental leadership structure is an obstacle to change (e.g., unanimous vote by deacons or elders).
- C. *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.

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.

A. *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.

B. *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:

1. Leadership and members are fearful of change:
 - a. Change is emotionally and physically difficult.
 - b. Church embraces the personality of the pastor.
 - c. Resistance is treated as an obstruction not an invitation to reflection.

- d. While changes may be taken seriously, the potential unrest it would cause outweighs the possibilities.
2. Security is found in regularity:
 - a. Same church order of service.
 - b. Clock governs decision-making.
 - c. Same songs and prayers are habitually and regularly offered.
 - d. Risks are avoided.
 3. Familiarity is valued over creativity.
 - a. Members are untapped resources: unused, unexposed, or unable to be given a platform.
 - b. Involvement with the unknown is too risky.
 - c. Creativity is stifled.
 - d. Same people do the same jobs.
 - e. Sing the same songs.
 - f. Play the same instruments.
 4. 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.
 5. 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.
 6. 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.

C. *Analysis:*

1. Church needs to rethink its position on change.
2. Look at risk from a different perspective.
3. Though change for change sake is not profitable, change to meet a growing need is natural and necessary for growth.
4. 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.
5. Incorporating objects of art can be used to assist in changing the worship service from inactivity to active engagement.³

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.

A. *Prefatory Remarks:*

1. Sensational church is preoccupied with indulgence in activities.
2. Sensational church is overly focused on excessive undergoing (receptivity), crowding as many fanciful impressions as possible into one event.
3. 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.

B. *Strengths:*

1. People in this church are quick to respond to crises in community.
2. Sensitive to racial tensions and gender issues by emphasizing unity.

³ Dewey writes:

3. Tend to be socially and politically involved in public protests strive against vices in the community, and support public officials.
4. Church embraces technological changes, welcoming technological revolutions, and assimilating new advances into the worship experience.
5. Music is performed brilliantly.

C. *Problem of Imbalance:*

1. 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.
2. 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.

D. *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.

E. *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).

F. *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?

G. *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.

H. 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. John Dewey puts it this way:

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.⁴

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. Conclusion: How to Recover from Anemic Worship: Be a “Live” Church:

- A. In conclusion, 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 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.

⁴ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkeley Publishing Group, 1934, 2005), 42.

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 aesthetic activities, practices, and rituals are likely to come “alive” and be very meaningful for those involved.
6. 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).
7. Once again, 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.
8. Integrate the architecture, fellowship, instruction, music, prayer, and other activities, recognizing their functional use. All aspects are carefully examined to see how they might organically relate to the sum-total of the worship service.
9. Do not 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”)
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. 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.”

13. *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.⁵

⁵ 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].