ESSAY ON BEAUTY AND ARCHITECTURE

D. Min. Semester 1 Artifact Project

Rev. Emily K. Behghin
September 15, 2020
ABSTRACT

This research paper explores beauty through the realm of theological aesthetics found within architecture and interior design with the use of theological and liturgical signs and symbols. As society has evolved over time, so too have the needs of the worship space. From nomadic cultures to the postwar modernist era of the 1950’s and 1960’s this essay will explore how functionality and theology have shaped the work of church architects through the ages. The church as a body of people is partially recognized and known through the spaces in which they worship. This paper asks, “How is God’s glory reflected in the aesthetic decisions made for each worship space and how are those details formative in relation to the congregation?” The architect as artist in partnership with the theologian is tasked with the duty of designing and creating a space which directs the worshipper to praise God.

INTRODUCTION

When we speak of beauty, often we speak of what is most pleasing to the eye, but when beauty is used as a term that points to the spiritual, it becomes something more; something to be experienced. Worship spaces through the ages have been vital connection points for those who seek God. Like living stones, a church, when created with masterful care, can be a place that raises up Christians to newness in covenant life. Throughout the ages the church as a building has taken several different forms, each corresponding to fit the needs of its function and theology of its people. Beauty is what happens when function and theological aesthetics come together to create a space that compels one into worship. Each architectural style we will explore through its function, theology, and traditional roots will lead us ultimately to that which makes First Presbyterian Church of Bryan beautiful as a reflection of God’s glory that both mirrors the heart of and forms the faith lives of her congregation. Architecture as an expression of beauty, calls us to explore more deeply the places in which we would converse with God.

WHAT IS BEAUTY?

Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, in his book, The Community of the Beautiful, defines beauty as a direct reflection of the glory of God.1 Beauty serves to move the human heart towards love and praise of God.2 God is defined as “the beautiful” or the origin of all beauty. Upon bearing witness to recognizing the beautiful and God’s workings in our world (glory) we, in turn, are moved into acts of praise, expressing this praise in a myriad of theological aesthetic forms.

WHAT IS A THEOLOGICAL AESTHETIC?

While beauty can be recognized, for example, in the painting of a flower, when it is expressed in a theological sense, it becomes a theological aesthetic or an expression of beauty that speaks to the spiritual and religious dimensions of our souls and of society. The creator of a theological aesthetic was assumed until roughly the eighteenth century to be capable, without question, of receiving the beautiful and mirroring it with beauty in form.

This notion was challenged by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, a German philosopher who introduced the idea of aesthetics as a “science of what is sensed or imagined” in 1735.3 Arguably, in his philosophy of forms, Plato had created the idea of aesthetics, which was furthered into the theological realm in Augustine’s

anagogical theory of signs, but it was not given a formal name until Baumgarten introduced the concept officially in his master’s thesis. Baumgarten argued that not all beauty is first received from the divine. This idea is very widely accepted today. How do we know that humanity is capable of receiving the beautiful or that God is a divine being that wishes for God’s children to receive and know the beautiful in the first place?

Baumgarten’s questioning is countered affirmatively when we encounter the incarnation as a confirmation that God, the origin of the beautiful, does wish to be known, loved, praised, and recognized by God’s children through Jesus Christ. In this sense, Ars Humana, human art, has the capability to truly convey beauty in theologically aesthetic forms. In a profound letter to artists in 1999, Pope St. John Paul II wrote eloquently of how “the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator.” He stated: “With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of His own surpassing wisdom, calling him or her to share in His creative power.”

Beauty that invites wonder and awe can be found all around us if we know how to see. Beauty as a theological aesthetic, that invites a sense of the sacred must reflect the glory of God in ways that invite contemplation or inspire gratitude or praise. Throughout the ages, beauty in the sacred has been expressed through forms of music, dance, poetry, written and spoken word, photography, artwork, and architecture. In its many forms, beauty as a mirrored reflection of God’s glory in the human experience, has inspired and driven history, bringing both profound acts of war and of transcending love. Beauty, in this sense, moves the world spiritually to seek God in our midst.

**ARCHITECT AS ARTIST, THE CHURCH AS A THEOLOGICAL AESTHETIC**

Architecture is not often discussed alongside the great works of beauty such as Michelangelo’s David or Jan van Eyck’s Ghent Altarpiece, but as a theological aesthetic, architecture may be one of the most tremendous forms of expression that invites wonder and praise. It is important to note that any architect who endeavors to build a worship space as a theological aesthetic must be in conversation with theologians and believers. The architect considers functionality of space and the theologian considers the sacred aesthetic.

As we explore the historical movements of worship spaces, we must also explore their root functionality that inspired their core shapes and features. Pope St. John Paul II explains in his letter to the artists that, “the functional is always wedded to the creative impulse inspired by a sense of the beautiful and an intuition of the mystery.” As we briefly peer through the windows of history into the different models of worship spaces, we will perceive how functionality and beauty have been woven together and have become intertwined over time.

Architecture has the ability to create a space that draws us in and our attentions upward towards God. Through both style and functionality, worship spaces may aid the believer in a journey of prayer and contemplation with God. Beauty as expressed through architecture has been most utilized by the Church since the early middle ages in Western Christianity.

---


DEFINING THE CHURCH

Before we are able to discuss the history of the building of a church, we first must define what a church is. A church is not the building it uses, but the building rather, serves as a reflection of the church itself; the relationship between God and the people of God.

The Presbyterian Church of the United States of America defines the Church in the “Book of Order,” section F-1.0301, citing 1 Corinthians 12, “The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world.” Continuing, the PC(U.S.A.) states that the key characteristics of the people of the Church are to be a community of hope, love, faith, and witness.

Similarly, in 1 Peter 2: 4-5, the Church can also be defined as living stones: “Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” It follows, that the gathering place of the faithful shall be made of stones that reflect the living stones, compiled in such a way as to nurture faith, encourage hope, inspire love, and demonstrate witness. Therefore, as we discuss the history of church architecture, it is absolutely essential that we also explore the function of the church, for how beauty, as it has been understood through time, is liturgically represented within the walls of the sanctuaries and sacred places of worship.

AN OVERVIEW OF CHURCH ARCHITECTURE THROUGH THE AGES, EXAMINING FUNCTION AND THEOLOGICAL AESTHETIC

Before Common Era (B.C.E.)

Israel, as a tribe of God’s people were once nomadic (13th century BCE), roaming the earth seeking a home with God. God was understood then to be with God’s people as they traveled, dwelling in a tent and leading them by a pillar of cloud in the day and of fire by night.9 As they would wander, when the people of Israel came upon a holy site, they would erect an Ebenezer; a pile of living stones to stand as a living representation of prayer and sacred presence of God. When we come upon an Ebenezer, we know that the place we are in is holy. Believers did not have a specific place made of brick and mortar for worship of God, but understood God as living among them.

The tents erected for God’s dwelling place would be placed at the center of the camp, but Moses, as noted in Exodus, would set a separate tent outside of the camp specifically for the purposes of conversing with God privately.10 This tent of meeting could be used by anyone to go and pray. Within the tabernacle tent at the center of camp, however, there was also a set aside place within it called, “The Holy of Holies” where only the high priest could enter.11 The priest served as a direct line to God and therefore required a separate space to be with God. This model of spatial separation between clergy and laity in terms of sacred experience of God’s word is still prevalent today in Eastern orthodox traditions such as the Greek Orthodox Church.

---

9 Exodus 13:21
10 Exodus 33:7-11
Once God’s people reached the promised land, Canaan, they began to settle into more permanent dwellings. There were twelve tribes, each allotted a territory within this new promised land.12 In Shiloh, found in Ephraim, there was a tabernacle for God with the belief that God would dwell there. In the 11th and 12th centuries, Shiloh, where the biblical priest, Eli resided, housed the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant given to Moses. Though, given the permanent nature of their settlement, the tribes decided to build a Temple in Jerusalem, south of Shiloh in the territory of Benjamin. This was common in its time as other nations—pagan nations, had houses for each of their gods. The Jews found this to be limiting though, as not all God’s people lived in this one place or within reasonable proximity. Not to mention, the Jewish people were later exiled twice, and their temple demolished.

When David came to reign as Israel’s king from 1011-971 BCE, it is written in the book of 2nd Samuel chapter 7, “Go and tell my servant David: Thus, says the Lord: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” One central house for God, therefore, was not deemed as essential any longer.

Common Era (C.E.)

Worship centers in villages and in homes began to become more prevalent as a result of the inconveniences of travel and exile, and the belief that God was found wherever God’s people would be. It is in this setting, the local temples and home gatherings, that we see Jesus begin his faith education and ministry.

Jesus’ apostles traveled and never understood or preached that God’s presence was limited to a particular synagogue (Ancient Greek word meaning a place to gather in) or place, but they would gather anywhere they could; on hillsides, by bodies of water, in gardens and deserts, and when they could, homes and synagogues. Synagogues were a place set aside within civilization meant for prayer, study, and reflection. Even after Christ’s death and resurrection, the apostles were known to go to the synagogues to pray and to preach13. The very first church, in the sense we now know it, the rock upon which Peter held his church, was in his home in Capernaum. There was a single room large enough to gather 8-10 people within to listen to and know the gospel. The tradition of worshiping in the home continued as the norm until the legalization and full recognition of Christianity as a religion.

Catacombs

Beginning with the emperor, Nero in 64 A.D., Christians in Rome were more harshly persecuted, martyred, and thousands were buried within the catacombs beneath the city streets. This persecution lasted on and off through the years until the edict of Milan under Emperor Constantine in 313 A.D. The catacombs were seemingly endless and easily disorienting. Long stretches of earthen hallways lined with bodies stacked into the walls ran beneath much of Rome.

Catacombs were separated by religion. There were Pagan catacombs, Jewish catacombs, and Christian catacombs. Depending on a person’s economic status, they may have anything from a simple unmarked slot in the wall to a room comparable to a family mausoleum today. Some small clusters would form gatherings to hear

13 Acts 13:14-52 Peter preaches in a synagogue
and read the gospel together within the catacombs\(^\text{14}\). These spaces were tucked away from the prying eyes of Roman soldiers and provided a sense of greater freedom, but these locations were not used on a regular basis for worship\(^\text{15}\). These spaces evolved into small chapels for acts of devotion to the martyrs buried within, and this is one of the first places we begin to see permanent Christian artistic expression in a uniquely Christian place of worship.

Artwork and Christian symbols can still be seen by visitors to these sites today. Symbols such as doves, anchors, or fish were used to mark the graves of lower-class Christians. Scenes of Biblical stories adorned the wealthier graves and the ceilings of the worship spaces within the catacombs.

**The Roman Basilica and the Emergence of Artistic and Architectural Beauty in the Church**

In 313 A.D. with the Edict of Milan under the Emperor Constantine, Christianity was made legal and began to blossom through the Roman Empire. Small chapels, homes, and rented residential spaces were no longer suitable to fit the needs of the growing numbers. The new Christian worship space had to accommodate several hundreds more.

The Roman Basilica became an ideal place to gather for worship. These buildings were civic buildings and could be rented for use by several different groups\(^\text{16}\). Chosen not for its beauty or spiritual style, the Roman Basilica was rather chosen for its functionality to house a large group of people for worship and participation in the sacrament of the eucharist\(^\text{17}\). They were large, spacious, and filled with natural light; a perfect space. Legal proceedings, storage, social gatherings, and political groups also held their meetings here.

As Christianity grew, Christians were able to buy and own the basilicas and modify them to fit liturgical, functional needs. Many scholars emphasize that it was the Roman Basilica that truly birthed the movement of theologically and liturgically deep and beautiful Christian artistic expression within the worship space.\(^8\)

The Bishop, Rev. Kevin C. Rhoades reflects in the journal for the Institute for Sacred Architecture\(^\text{18}\), “The results were amazing: basilicas like Saint John Lateran and old Saint Peter’s, and many others. The art (paintings, mosaics, sculptures) filled these churches, raising the hearts and minds of Christians to the mysteries of our faith. These great buildings were functional for the liturgy, but, as Saint John Paul II wrote: “the functional is always wedded to the creative impulse inspired by a sense of the beautiful and an intuition of the mystery.” The freedom to express praise through works of aesthetic beauty and to create spaces that reflected the liturgical needs of the church allowed for significant modifications to what was once simply one large room. We see this demonstrated especially in the period of the renaissance as there was a societal resurgence of creativity and artistry within the religious realm.


The Western Church in the Early Middle Ages through the Renaissance (476 A.D.-1600 A.D.)

Sacred Architecture as a form of beauty became a central focus of the Western Church in the early middle ages beginning with Romanesque keystones, archways, and cloisters, evolving with renaissance era doorways, sculptures, triptychs, and trinitarian designs, and more completely detailed in the baroque flourishes of vaulted ceilings and flying buttresses. The Western Church, at this time, was divided into two main branches; the church, organized around a bishop, and the monasteries.

Around the beginning of the middle ages (476 A.D.)\(^{19}\), the role of clergy became one for only the most educated of men and therefore the monasteries were a place of learning and practice separate from the largely illiterate society. This gave the clergy of the Church complete control over the output of the Gospel and much power in the workings of politics. The church’s architectural design reflected this sense of separation and maintenance of intellectual power much like the original tabernacle in Exodus. The church’s design held two key elements: there was a space for the laity and a space for the ordained clergy\(^ {20}\). Ironically, one of the names for this space is the “presbytery.” These spaces were separate, and, in the beginning, the laity could only come to pray while it was largely unknown what the ordained clergy did in the inner sanctum of what we now know as the nave. These spaces were separated by a screen, usually made of ornately carved wood. The choir and the clergy could be heard, but not easily seen. Occasionally, a bell would ring, and a clergy would appear in the pulpit, raised high above the people to preach found near the midpoint of the public nave area.

Pews were not introduced until the 14\(^{th}\) century. For hundreds of years, the space for laity was meant for brief reflection and prayer rather than study, formal service hours, or long sermons. It was common for people to come and go as the clergy held their worship in private behind a screen or divider and often in the dead language of Latin, not understood by the average believer.

In the Gothic period (mid 12\(^{th}\) century-16\(^{th}\) century) the architecture of the church building itself began to shift to more deeply reflect the glory of God in shape and direction. Churches were now being built in the shape of a cross, the chancel at a slight angle to represent the head of our crucified Lord, Jesus Christ. Detailing and artwork shifted from the space having an overall narrative to sections of the space embracing different portions of the overall narrative of the gospel. The Gothic period, as it overlaps with the counter-reformation movement, reflects a focus on the Word of God made flesh in the bodily representations of Christ, suggested to be a form of resistance to the Renaissance ideas of transcendence found more prominently in the reforming churches where sacred art was being actively removed and destroyed.\(^ {21}\)

Stained glass windows, (thinly shaved stone in earlier times) began to make a regular appearance in this period as well, telling the stories of the Bible with their colors and shapes.\(^ {22}\) The interior of most churches in the middle ages was dark and the thin windows would offer a striking contrast with what used to be bright, almost blinding light. Artisans would use color to soften the light, resulting in beautiful shades of deep reds, purples, and other colors to illumine the word for those who were inside. These windows also served to tell the story of the gospel to the illiterate population.


One of the greatest divinely inspired works of beauty from that time period that still stands today is St. Peter’s Basilica of the Vatican. A superb example of early thinly shaved alabaster stone used as an artistic window is the dove as the Holy Spirit seen behind the ciborium (the ornate canopy over the altar) of St. Peter’s.\(^{23}\) Construction on the basilica spanned over 120 years coming to completion in 1626, making the construction a vocation for many workers. Those who worked to plan, build, and rebuild it knew they would most likely never see it in its final form. For hundreds of years, St. Peter’s has been a marvel, inspiring pilgrims and travelers from all corners of the earth to come and stand in awe and wonder at its incredible beauty. The detailing of the building both on its façade and within is so immense that one could spend years gazing upon it and never truly see all there is to be found. Each detail, every crevice, and every archway were conceptualized by architectural and artistic masters such as Bramante, Raphael, Michelangelo, Donato, and others from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Ralph Waldo Emerson, American philosopher and essayist, once described the basilica as “an ornament of the earth… the sublime of the beautiful.”\(^{24}\)

REFORMATION

In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the doors of the church in Wittenberg unsuspectingly sparking a faith revolution. In the beginning of the reformation, churches were not being built completely new, but were converted or modified on the inside. The focus upon wealth, prestige, and power disturbed Luther in his theology that the focus need be on the scriptures that point us to God and not on the majesty of the misunderstood and mysterious ways the rituals of the church were being performed. Excessive ornamentation was not necessary to the faith but could be a distraction from the focus of worshiping God. Luther left Wittenberg for a year in 1521 and an interim minister, Andreas Karlstadt occupied the pulpit. It was Karlstadt who is credited with beginning the brash movement of removing artwork from the worship space. “Luther’s own conservatism regarding the liturgy, art, and environment of worship was itself a reaction to what he saw as the excess of the iconoclastic Andreas Karlstadt. During Luther’s self-imposed exile of 1521, Karlstadt instituted sweeping reforms to the liturgy and removed all images from the church in Wittenberg.”\(^{25}\) Karlstadt is deemed as responsible for beginning some of the major upheavals surrounding the aesthetics of worship spaces leading ultimately to Jon Knox’s movements in Scotland.

Lutheran churches shifted their focus to the gathering of saints, later put into writing in the Augsburg Confession (1530), believing that wherever they were gathered, it was the gathering itself that was sacred. The new Lutheran churches reflected a focus upon the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper and made subtle modifications in order to more easily hear and understand the words of the priest, now spoken in their own tongue. The chancel, therefore, had three main focal points: the altar, the baptismal font, and the ambo (pulpit). The only art that remained or was introduced into the space was considered to be didactic, or for learning purposes rather than to be used as tools for prayer and praise. The art was not considered to be any more sacred than a blade of grass just outside. This mode of thinking is also extremely prevalent in the reformed churches that grew from Luther’s initial actions.

Presbyterians-- Calvinists, were considered the most extreme in the Reformation, removing and destroying all that used to adorn the church’s interior. Lutherans saw themselves as toeing the lines between


Calvinist iconoclasm and Catholic excessiveness. Both reformers, Huldrych Zwingli and Jean Calvin ordered the systematic stripping of the altars all over Europe, creating whitewashed and naked spaces that could be considered more closely related to the original rented Roman Basilica; a secular meeting place. “Abraham Taurer, pastor in the village of Schwertzau in the diocese of Magdeburg, reminded his readers in 1597 that images were intended ‘for the adornment of the church’ as well as for commemoration. Taurer complained that the Calvinists’ churches ‘resembled a public beer hall rather than a temple of the Lord’.”26 Today, if one visits the Presbyterian Meeting House in Williamsburg, Virginia, one of the first settlements in the New World, we can see Taurer’s point exactly as the idea of a bare gathering place continued on into the 18th century.

**Presbyterians and the Pulpit- Reformation**

Calvinists during the reformation were actively destroying iconography and altars. John Knox, in line with other Calvinists of his day, began his purge of Catholic artistry in Perth, Scotland with the burning of church art, making the spaces bare and more focused on the Word given from the pulpit. The reformed idea of sola scriptura given in a language that believers could comprehend framed the significance of the pulpit as a place to be heard from that God’s gospel news could be shared and widely understood. Divisive screens were removed, and the nave became one large space rather than two separate spaces, bringing clergy and laity together as closer equals.27 Pews were directed and placed such that the Word could be a main focal point in services. The presbytery (the closed space for choir and clergy)28 now became the chancel; an elevated space for the functionality that all could see and hear the liturgy being presented.

**Presbyterians and the Altar- Reformation**

As Calvinism spread throughout Europe, the altar was replaced by a table that communion could be served to all the faithful people at least four times in a year. Catholic altars were ornate, carved with beautiful representations of Jesus’ life story. The art on them was not simple enough to be considered didactic, but rather the images themselves were in want of devotion and praise in the eyes of the Reformed viewer. An altar also stood as a remnant of the Catholic theology of transubstantiation, that Jesus was literally in the bread and the wine and therefore a sacrifice needing to be made, making those objects, ones worthy of praise and devotion. Presbyterians and Lutherans both agreed that Christ had already paid the ultimate sacrifice29, and therefore an altar was not needed but rather a table. Consubstantiation, the belief that Christ’s presence is a “real presence” with the elements and the congregation of believers30, is a belief stemming back to Luther, which was slightly modified to indicate a “spiritual presence” as a prominent trademark in the Presbyterian confessions. A simple table was considered the more didactic approach in line with the theology of presence over substance.

**Presbyterians and the Baptismal Font- Reformation**

The font, still present in the chancel, was not more than a confessional symbol. In a split from the Lutheran church, the Presbyterian church omitted exorcism from the baptismal rites and dismissed it because it


29 Based on Galatians 3:23-26.

was viewed to be a leftover papal relic\textsuperscript{31}. Tensions between Lutherans and Calvinist surrounding the issue of baptismal rites concerning exorcism reached high tension levels in 1591, when some Lutheran churches were ordered also to omit the exorcism as a part of the rite. Calvinist baptisms became known as incorrect, incomplete, and edging on heathen.

These movements and changes directed the reformed Presbyterian church for the next several centuries as to how to arrange the interior of the now communal nave. The theological aesthetics had shifted from iconographic works of art to didactic scenes in windows and a rearranging of the worship space to accentuate the Word spoken and the sacraments given as tangible symbols of Christ among us.

**Architectural Phases of the Church in the United States of America**

**1700’s Colonial America**

In Colonial America, the Meeting House style also known as the “Plain style” was considered a frontier necessity for church buildings as the function was simply to have a place to gather for worship.\textsuperscript{32} Derived from the theological concepts of the Reformation, the Protestants in the New World did not see reason to create lavish buildings for worship in a place that was being raised up for the first time from wilderness to civilization, hence we have places such as the famous Presbyterian Meeting House in Williamsburg, Virginia.\textsuperscript{33}

These spaces were meant to house a small cluster of believers at a time to hear the Word of God and worship together. As civilization expanded, these meeting houses also functioned for government meetings, again reminding us of the purposes of the great yet rented Roman Basilica’s as the church was only beginning in 313 A.D. and shared the space with other secular groups. The church was seen as a place to gather, but not a place that housed God or held sacred artwork. The Word was the primary theological aesthetic and the function of the building served as a place to gather, not as a place to be praised as God is believed to be wherever the people may gather. This style prevailed in early America until roughly the year 1800.

**1818-1850**

As cities began to grow in the eastern part of the United States, church architecture went through a few different phases rather quickly. All of the following architectural styles try to capture tradition in a new way. The church was no longer just a meeting place to hear the word, but it was also a permanent structure to settle into. What makes a church look like a church? Depending on the denomination and the desires of the congregations, these were some of the answers to that question.


In 1818 until about 1850 we see the rise of Early Greek Revival style architecture.34 An example of this that still stands today is Zion Presbyterian Church in Maury County, Tennessee built in 1847. Among parishioners of both Caucasian and African American races, was James K. Polk for a time. This church features a terraced roof and columns at the entrance.

1820-1860

Overlapping with the time of the Early Greek Revival, we also see buildings from the Early Gothic Revival lasting from 1820 to 1860. Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Nashville, TN built in 185235 exhibits this Gothic style with renaissance doorways, slanted roofs, and stone bell towers.

1850-1880

The High Victorian Gothic Style was utilized in 1850 through roughly 188035. This more ornate style featuring rose windows and renaissance archways, and gothic bell towers harkens back to the origins of our Reformed traditions; the bare, once Catholic churches and Cathedrals of Western Europe. Built in 1894, Christ Church Episcopal in Nashville, TN is a beautiful example of this time.

1870-1895

The Richardson Romanesque style arrived on the Eastern American scene in 1870. “This style, named for architect Henry Hobson Richardson, features walls constructed with large split-faced blocks and dramatic semicircular arches. Richardson's unique style parallels Romanesque principles of plain and massive structures.”35 Built in 1892, Tulip Street Methodist Church demonstrates this style well in Nashville, Tennessee. Its façade features Roman arch windows and doorways, rounded edges, and stone base work. The church’s foundations were designed in 1859, but the construction of this beautiful building was interrupted by the American Civil War and therefore not completed until 1892.

---


1885-1920

The Renaissance Revival (Neo-Renaissance) from 1885 to 1920 harkens back to ancient Greek and Roman elements of symmetry and with the use of both rounded Romanesque archways and triangular pointed door adornments as may be found on the ancient temples of Athens. This style is closely related to the 16th century Classical Revival found in Italy and France. Gothic and Baroque elements were also included depending on the church building. This blend of styles may make a church’s inspirations hard to place in one era. The interiors of these buildings were often designed separately from the exterior and treated differently as we will also see in the postwar modernist style yet to come. Truly, this seems almost to be an experimental time for church architects as they combined so many different elements that most Neo-Renaissance churches do not look related to the others. With various inspirations to draw from, how does one know if they are looking upon a Neo-Renaissance style church? The key lies in symmetry and ornate exterior window designs paying tribute to the collective traditions of Christianity from ages past.

1885-1930

The Collegiate Gothic Style is one that reflects on the Gothic Revival with favor. Most prominent in educational buildings such as the universities of Oxford, Yale, Duke, Harvard, Knox, and others, this style was also a popular choice for churches being erected around the same time. The style harkened back to pre-Reformation roots of Catholic cathedrals inspired by the medieval and early Renaissance eras. Used to honor tradition and to exude grandeur, these buildings are considered some of the most beautiful of the modern era. These buildings typically feature a rectangular foundational plan, gothic renaissance arches, buttresses, and tracery. Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary’s Shelton Chapel in Austin, TX commissioned in 1940 is a great example of a small scale Collegiate Gothic Style religious building.

---

1900-1960

The Neo-Classicism style of the first half of the 20th century is based on classic Greek buildings with white pillared porticos and triangular detailing on the façade. In the Eastern United States and the beginning of the expansion West, most of these buildings are made of red brick with the white Greek pillars and triangular details. The churches will also feature a tall steeple in most cases. Churches like these are very prominent in areas like Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee, but are also found in California as Western states settled into their own development. One such example of a neo-classicist church would be First Presbyterian Church of Virginia Beach, Virginia, complete with a Neo-Classical courtyard and dual twin facades on both its chapel entrance and main sanctuary. The interiors of these structures tend to mimic the same style as is found on the outside with subtle detailing in crowned molding, clean cut doorways, and rectangular windows.

1950’s Postwar Suburban Modernism

Across America, “White” suburbs were growing rapidly with brick and mortar rectangular ranch style homes; affordable and appropriate for young and growing families. This was the era of the “White American middle class.” As quickly as the homes were appearing, so too it seemed that churches were also being constructed. This style is one of the most criticized by modern day architects as being plain, unremarkable, and in some cases, drab. However, for their time, these churches represented a desire by their congregations for the sacred to meet with the modern atomic era.

These churches were considered to be almost radical statements. For the first time in American history, churches being constructed were entirely new in their vision; not looking back on another time in architectural history. Presbyterian churches of this era, in their construction, were usually directed by a building committee and completed in stages that flexibility would be allowed in funding and design. Their modest outward appearance could be altered often on the interior with woodwork and the use of symbols throughout. The interior was not dependent upon the style of the exterior. This gave congregations opportunities to design spaces that reflected their identity in relation with their understanding of and love for God.

Much like the Roman Basilicas, the functionality of a large space is made in the stones of the postwar modernist church, and the artistic additions to the interior gave it spiritual beauty. These churches are a direct reflection of what 1950’s and 1960’s era Americans were trying to say about their relationship between spiritual tradition and the age. That is, God is alive here and now and is not limited to the ways of the past.

First Presbyterian Church of Bryan, Texas is a product of its time; a postwar suburban modernist church. Though designed by architect Henry Mayfield in 1956, this church was built in stages with the sanctuary beginning in late 1964 and being completed in 1966 by architect William Nash. Though fairly plain with clean lines and red brick on her exterior, First Presbyterian boasts a theologically rich yet humble interior with classically reformed wood detailing and timeless, covenantal faceted glass windows. If beauty were truly found within the soul, First Presbyterian Church would serve as the perfect example, as a reflection of the glory of God as God’s glory lives on in her congregation.

AN EXAMINATION OF THE BEAUTY IN THE THEOLOGICAL AESTHETICS OF FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BRYAN

Postwar Suburban Modern churches, though as mentioned, appearing plain to the modern era, do reflect a sense of beauty as defined in Alejandro Garcia-Rivera’s book, The Community of the Beautiful. Built sturdily of brick and mortar and made unique by the spire which reaches up “to touch the finger of God,” this church is truly a standing Ebenezer; reflecting the glory of God in timelessness, presence, strength, and as a part of society dwelling among us. The inspiration thus, was to create not only a place for prayer and praise, but a statement that God is alive here and hears our prayers though we exist in a time marked differently than all others by industry, world wars, and the shifting of societal structures such as class, racial relations, and gender equality. The church stands boldly as a part of the everyday, blended into the neighborhood as an important part of life, yet not a set apart portion of life. The church was moving forward with and among her people.

As stated earlier though, what is remarkable about these churches other than their strong theological statement on the outside is their humble, yet theologically rich interiors, each unique and designed by the people with their understanding of beauty (the direct reflection of the glory of God). The architect masterfully designs the shell that will be filled with beauty to make it more complete by the congregation.

Theological Study Inspires Theological Aesthetics: Covenant Life Curriculum

In the late 1950’s and early 1960’s Covenant Theology had begun to make its mark across America. The Southern Presbyterian Church’s (PCUS) Covenant Life Curriculum, which made its debut in 1963 very much reflects the desire of reformed traditions in this time period to “adequately communicate the Christian faith in the life of the modern world.”42 Covenant Life Curriculum was a new product that came after the Presbyterian denomination realized a need for a major overhaul of their educational theories and methods from the previous decades.43 This curriculum valued the home as a primary place of Christian learning in partnership with the church and sought to bring Christ into a relative sphere for the participant.

In the Covenant Life Curriculum’s introductory adult study, Into Covenant Life44, by William Bean Kennedy, the curriculum is introduced in simple terms. It is designed to encourage the living of a Christian life, but the word Christian in this context means the believer belongs to the covenant. What is a covenant?

“Covenant” comes from the Bible, where it points to the relationship between God and his people.”45 The covenant is a cyclical relationship between Creator and creation. God loves us and redeems us, promising grace and love. Humankind in return promised to obey God’s laws and belong to Him. The covenant in this curriculum then, is to be understood as a bond, a tie that tethers us in relationship with the Almighty. The idea is

to explore the questions we have, find the answers we need to encourage covenant living, and allow ourselves to be open to wonder beyond those answers. Just as God is alive in the here and now, so too is the covenant; a lifestyle to be claimed by the faithful and faithfully lived into with joy.

First Presbyterian Church had begun to use the Covenant Life Curriculum (C.L.C.) in January of 1963 with a Covenant Life Planning Committee. The minister, Rev. Richard H. Thomas, would begin a preaching series using the main titles of this curriculum on March 24th of that year. All Wednesday night adult classes would begin the curriculum on March 27th to be followed up by the Sunday morning classes on April 7th. Shortly thereafter the youth and children would also be introduced to the curriculum appropriate to their age.

First Presbyterian Church Builds a Sanctuary

The building plans for the sanctuary were completed in stages from 1956 to 1964 by the building committee in partnership with architects Mayfield and Nash and R.B. Butler Inc., a local construction company. The connection between the postwar modernist structure’s theological statement and the denominational shift to covenant theology demonstrate the collective needs of Christians in this era to understand God in a way that honored tradition but also looked to the future as a part of the ongoing story of God. The Church had been studying the C.L.C. for one year before the sanctuary designs had been completed.

The discussions of the interior that would be filled with theological aesthetic beauty had begun and covenant theology is evident in the planning and execution of these decisions. When designing a beautiful space, the church must ask itself, “How does this thing serve?” In each carefully chosen and created aesthetic we find function and praise. In these designs inspired by covenant theology, we more specifically find an interior that serves to point the believer towards covenant life.

Beginning, of course, with one of the most notable covenants in the Bible (Noah’s Ark), First Presbyterian’s largest feature of beauty is in her bones, or ribs as you may call them. The decision to accentuate their existence in exposed wooden detailing points us to a congregation that was aware of God’s loving hand still ever present with promises kept, guiding them through a stormy age. These would be the Ark Beams.

Ark Beams:

In November of 1956, architect, Henry Mayfield completed the blueprints to the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church. With clean-cut, straight lines, the plans show a very traditional model of a 20th century reformed postwar modernist church. Like many built around this time, the nave is oblong, the center aisle breaking up the pews, each side is lined with beautiful faceted-glass windows and the focal point for the worshipper is the cross. A seemingly mundane detail, however, must be highlighted. In Mr. Mayfield’s plans, he places wooden beams in partnership with interior metal support beams along the ceiling of the sanctuary. These wooden beams begin from the floor, tracing up the walls and meeting at a point in the A-frame of the ceiling creating a ribbing effect. This was not done merely for decorative purposes, but as a theological statement that the church is like an ark. Reflecting God’s promise and love for God’s faithful, this ark detailing is an aesthetically beautiful detail both theological and practical in nature.

---

The word *nave*, stemming from its Latin origin, *navis*, means ship.48 This, the place where worshippers come to sit, listen, grow, and praise. This is a shelter for their souls; a vessel to carry them through the dark waters of this world. This image of the great ship is inspired by Genesis chapter 6 with the story of Noah’s ark. God, determined to drown the world and cleanse it of all evil, approaches Noah, a faithful servant, and asks him to faithfully build an ark of safety for his family and a great many creatures that will serve to last them through 150 days of flood rains. Though the church would not stand in a major flood, metaphorically, our faith is an ark in the floodwaters of that which is not of God. The wooden beams of the sanctuary serve as a reminder of the call on the faithful to serve in hope as Noah did when building the ark. (The full sense of the nave being fashioned as an ark/ship is accomplished if- in one’s mind’s eye- the top roofline is flipped to be imagined as the ship’s keel.) In the sailing, God’s people are safe and equipped for serving. This functions to remind us that we are saved by faith and a life faithfully lived is lived in good service to God. This is the basis of living a covenant life.

**Cross:**

As one enters the sanctuary of First Presbyterian Church from the Narthex entrance, the first thing we may notice is the large wooden cross at the focal point of the chancel, hanging upon lattice work of tartan striping. This is the second largest aesthetic detail within the building and immediately we know we are in a church, a Reformed church as the cross stands empty, symbolizing that Christ has risen and is no longer bound here, but moves with us and beckons us into His promised tomorrow. The lattice work behind the cross speaks to the Presbyterian identity, tracing its roots back to the Scottish Highlands, a symbol of strength, identity, and family. Furthermore, the lattice work is also functional as a front-piece between the organ’s pipes and the congregation.

**Faceted Glass Windows:**

The third most significant feature, and perhaps one of the greatest expressions of beauty within First Presbyterian Church of Bryan is the series of 11 “Covenant Windows” that encase the worshippers within the story of God. Literally, as we walk into the sanctuary, we enter from beneath the nativity window and gaze upon the cross; the beginning and the end of Christ’s story on earth and we are surrounded with tales from Genesis to today.

---

As we may recall from earlier in this paper, the tradition of stained-glass windows began with the Roman Basilicas to tame the light and dark contrast within the worship spaces. Over time these tinted glasses were used to create theological aesthetics in beauty. First Presbyterian Church chose to continue this tradition with a strong liturgical and reformed understanding of the covenant stories within the Bible. Their choice of glass artist therefore was carefully made; and the artist himself was extremely oriented to a partnership with the church.

Glass artist, Gordon W. Smith was commissioned in 1965 by the church to render God’s story in faceted glass. Unlike stained glass, faceted glass is colored glass that is held together by a cement-like epoxy. Each window consists of six individual block panels that are stacked upon each other. Smith’s studio in Fort Worth, TX did not disappoint as the story came to life with colors, shapes, and details that not only tell the story of God and humanity but point beyond it; inviting us to continue living in the covenant.

Medieval scholar, Thomas Aquinas held that beauty is found in things that reach out to us and reveal themselves as something more. This theory was called claritas or clarity and was part of a three-piece theory on what it is to know beauty. A creator of true beauty inspired by God’s glory will always point the believer to a closer relationship with God in praise and adoration and bring about a sense of clarity within the great mystery. Gordon W. Smith’s work is a striking example of a theological aesthetic that does more than point us towards praise, but it draws us into conversation with God in wonderment and gratitude.

The Windows as Formative and Narrative, Didactic Works of Art

The windows are didactic in their telling of the stories. This type of artwork is called narrative artwork and exists for the telling of the story to be communicated to both the literate and illiterate, connecting people across generations and ability levels. This art, due to its use of symbols is also known as formational art. The symbols presented meet us where we are in our state of mind. They serve to connect the narrative to the viewer. They are artwork meant for communicating the story itself and are not calling us to make them into icons or idols. These renderings, while they do invite us into a state of wonderment, serve a different function than the triptych or the sculpture that would stand upon an altar. There are no places to kneel before them and they are not utilized in ways that would counter the Reformed Presbyterian belief system. Artwork that forms Christians is not that which would take us back in time, but that which would serve to find us and Jesus Christ within the same living moment.

Symbols for Wonderment Within the Windows

Inspired by their beauty, and the urging of FPC’s Director of Music, David Kipp, Rev. Ted Foote Jr. and Rev. Emily K. Béghin set out to complete a sermon series on each of the windows in the summer of 2020. The series dives into the artistry, the Biblical stories, and the theological implications of each window, but what was soon discovered is both the timeless and the forward thinking that continues to stretch our minds and pull on our heartstrings even today, 54 years later. In addition to classical images that reflect the biblical stories, Gordon W. Smith included symbols such as the scallop shell and the flag of Asturias, the grey hand of God, Jesus in the vision of Jeremiah, and an angel that stand over 8 feet tall. It is evident that Smith had an exceptional theological understanding and expertise in religious symbols.

---


Throughout the sermon series given in 2020, Rev. Foote and Rev. Béghin each highlight notable features within the artistry of the windows, each also giving us a clue to the identity of Mr. Smith as well. The spirit of the artist and the Holy Spirit play well together in the theological and biblical interpretations found in these covenant windows. Gordon W. Smith was a Methodist believer and had experience studying sculpting and mosaic art in Italy. His unique Reformed background meets beautifully with European theological symbols in the telling of the Bible stories.

The scallop shell and the flag of Asturias found in the baptism window and the resurrection/ascension window; each trace their roots to the Camino de Santiago; a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. James in Spain. It is suspected that because of Smith’s time in Italy and Europe, he would have known of the famous Camino pilgrimage and used both of these symbols to tie together the beginning and the earthly end of Jesus’ ministries, handing us the flag that we might take it up and continue on our pilgrimage in this life toward God. Yet, the final window in the series-- the window featuring the churches throughout time is perhaps the most profound as it directly invites us into participation into covenant life. Though each of the windows has extraordinary details that deserve our admiration and point us upward to the mysteries of God, this final window is one most relevant to this paper’s topic.

The 11th Window

As we examine its features, we are greeted by a Christ who looks directly upon us. His red and purple robes show us a royal Christ, King of all things and his feet being bare, show us a man humbled in a holy place. He holds in his hand the scroll of his identity; the alpha and the omega. These symbols would later be mirrored in the construction of the communion table which sits in the chancel near this window. He is the beginning and the end, and we meet him here securely in the middle. His left hand gestures toward the sanctuaries of time beginning with the catacombs, moving us upward to a Romanesque-Byzantine structure, joined there by the Renaissance, Baroque Notre Dame, the first building of First Presbyterian Church from 1906, and the current First Presbyterian Church of 1966 at the top. If we examine the current 1966 church, we will see that Smith has even included a tiny rendering of the Nativity window within this window. The portion to the right of the main entrance was in the building plans, but never came to fruition. It is what would have been the chapel. Today that area is occupied by landscaping and a parking lot.

Christ is not showing us what he has left to us, but seems to be beckoning us to continue the journey. He seems to dare us to be the church and to live as the church. This is the basis of covenant theology. The story of the windows takes us from Genesis to this, and in this window we find no ending, no finale, or final word. In this we find an invitation to go and be; to go and do, calling us into the life servitude in the rhythm of life’s grand pilgrimage, being birthed anew in Christ every day.

If the covenant is the relationship between God and humankind, then this window speaks directly to us today. There stands Christ, both God and man and behind him the beauty created by humankind as a reflection of all that Christ was and is. Each form is not more correct than the other but seems as a continuation of God’s story with us through the ages. Beauty in its forms points us toward God when truly inspired by the creator. Beauty aids the church in spiritual practice again and again.

The catacombs in their darkness, reflect a time of great perseverance and strength in the Christian faith. The artwork within them showing signs of both celebration and lament within the story of God’s people as they glorify him even among the dead. The Romanesque-Byzantine structure causes us to recall the beginnings of a liberated Christianity. The Cathedral of Notre Dame reminds us of a time when beauty flourished and stands to this day as beautiful as the glory of God reflected could be shown. These, our roots, lead to this congregation, from building to building, the church is her people, their structure only a covenant reflection in the Reformed tradition. Where will we go from here? The window seems to be answering, “Wherever Christ may lead us.”

More Symbols Within First Presbyterian Church’s Sanctuary:

Throughout the sanctuary we notice several other symbols amongst ordinary fixtures that would make them extraordinary in their beauty. It is important to note that a symbol is meaningless unless its story is made known. Therefore, it is vital that a formational church (one that seeks to aid the spirit in forming Christians) remember to properly teach and celebrate the stories of the symbols around us, so that we not forget the places from which we came as Christians and the ways in which we hold ourselves always to be living into a covenant life. It is also important for accessibility to visitors and those newer in the faith to be able to see and recognize the symbols before us.

The windows and the cross are easily understood as elements in the story of the Christian faith, but the ark beams and the smaller symbols found throughout the sanctuary are not as easily read or known, even to seasoned members. Notes follow here related to each of the symbols present within the sanctuary that, through understanding these, we might also understand the congregation of 1966 and how it has grown to form the congregation that exists today.

Pews:

The pews within the sanctuary are the original wooden pews from 1966. It is unknown as to why each particular symbol on their endcaps was selected, but it is clear to see how the stories of each symbol are evident in the characteristics of the congregation which sits in them today. These symbols, carefully carved and placed in alternating orders, serve as a reminder of the glory of God who has come to us in the sacrament of communion, in wisdom of the Holy Spirit, and in the ways of our faith ancestors of valiance and justice in grace.

Wheat:

In John 6:35, we read, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” Wheat is the main ingredient of bread, in the Christian tradition, the body of Christ. In a bundle, each piece of wheat comes together to make a sheaf; one body in Christ. When Jesus said at the least supper, that if we believe in him, we shall not want for anything more, it means our relationship of faith should be deeply satisfying. We shall not hunger or have the discomfort of thirst because Christ will give us these things abundantly.

7 tongues flame/dove:

The Holy Spirit has been described with movement like a dove coming out from heaven at the baptism of Jesus Christ, therefore it is no wonder that the dove has been known as perhaps the most prominent symbol of the Holy Spirit. A downward facing dove symbolizes the God coming to us (below) as the Holy Spirit, active in our lives. The circle around the dove’s head is a halo, a symbol of divinity.57

The carving on the pews depicting the dove ties together two prominent stories of the Holy Spirit from the New Testament. Of course, we have already mentioned the baptism of Christ, but also here, we see tongues of fire from the Pentecost story in the Second book of Acts. The two are tied together because it is believed that on Pentecost day the disciples received the blessings of faith and awareness to be able to fulfill a calling to share the gospel to all peoples.

The carving features seven tongues of flame streaming out from the Spirit. Throughout the Bible, seven is a significant number. Commonly known as the number of perfection, the number seven takes on a different meaning here. In Revelation chapter four verse five, there are seven torches aflame before the throne of God, each symbolizing a spirit of God who is perfect in all things.58 These seven torches are related to the Pentecostal story and Paul’s mention of the seven gifts of the Spirit in First Corinthians chapter twelve verses seven through eleven: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, fear of the Lord. In the Old Testament as well, we find seven gifts of the Spirit mentioned in Isaiah chapter eleven verses one and two: wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. These seven tongues of flame are linked to the seven gifts of the Spirit, resting upon the heads of each disciple.

Altogether, this carving serves to symbolize the action of the Holy Spirit coming into our lives bearing gifts in the faith to better know God and live as God’s servant people.

Fleur-de-lis:

Though the Fleur-de-lis has come to symbolize the reign of King Louis XVI and France in larger society, its origin belongs to the Iris.59 The iris flower has three petals that stand above those that droop below. These three petals point us to the trinity; God, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Maltese Cross:
This cross has 8 points, each standing for a beatitude found in Matthew 5:3-11. Each of these blessings is accounted for at the ends of the cross. “The eight points also symbolize the eight obligations or aspirations of the knights:
- to live in truth
- to have faith
- to repent of one's sins
- to give proof of humility
- to love justice
- to be merciful
- to be sincere and wholehearted
- to endure persecution.”

The Maltese Cross is so named for a group of knights known as the Order of St. John who lived on the island of Malta. These knights were comprised of laymen who wished to protect pilgrims in the 11th century who while on their journey to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, were often attacked by robbers and thieves. Today, the order is also known as the Knights of Hospitaller, so named for the hospital that was located at the heart of Old Jerusalem where the knights began. They also protected the sick and in need of care as well as pilgrims in the Holy Land. In the middle ages, they found their home in Malta and grew to occupy many nations as an official order. Over time they gained recognition from popes and nations as an official military entity. The Knights of St. John and the Knights Templar were the two most formidable forces of their time. Easily recognized now in much of medieval lore, these Maltese crosses adorned the shield of the knights and were painted in red, a royal color that symbolized both majesty and the fires of faith.

The exact reason why this symbol was chosen for the pew ends in First Presbyterian is unknown to us at this time, but it certainly speaks to the desire of the congregation to uphold those in need and protect those who would seek protection as evidenced in the many missions First Presbyterian continues to participate in both locally and globally.

The Chancel

The pews also feature their original red cushions, which matched the vibrant red carpet in the original sanctuary. Red was a popular color choice in many churches in the 1960’s as it symbolized the fire of the spirit. Though this may be an embellishment of the few, some have said a red carpet symbolized that we walk by faith. Today, the sanctuary hosts a forest green carpet, perhaps chosen for the life of the church or perhaps for how well it matched with the wood that runs throughout the sanctuary. The original sanctuary, dedicated on February 27th, 1966 is pictured below on its dedication day. Much about the chancel has changed since this time.

The original chancel resembled something closer to a presbytery or closed off space of choir and clergy from the congregation. Though visible to the congregation, the steps and wooden panels acted as a screen, setting aside this space. The reasons for this choice are unknown to us at this time, but the change that was made in later construction resembles more closely the theology of the priesthood of all believers that sets Presbyterians apart from most other traditions. The current chancel as refashioned and renovated in 2005 is pictured below.

We see that the priority of worship today is the word and sacrament in the placing of the pulpit, lectern, and communion table. The baptismal font is portable and often makes its home downstage left so to speak. These, the table, font, and pulpit, make up the centers for liturgical action that are absolutely necessary within the reformed church.
Pulpit

John 12:21 “Sir, we would see Jesus!” This passage is a popular one that may sit within the pulpit to remind the preacher of their sacred task, to present God’s word that the people may hear and know it in truth. The pulpit in the Presbyterian tradition is just as important as the table and often stands as a significant piece, raised up that all may see and hear the preacher and hear the word rightly proclaimed. In First Presbyterian Church, the pulpit fits such a description and stands to the left, though is easily moved around the chancel. On it are carved small Lutheran roses, perhaps to remind us that it is a privilege to preach the Word in words understood.

Table

The *Diocesan Building Directives*, a document created in 1957 by the Liturgical Commission of the Roman Catholic diocese of Superior, Wisconsin outlines the rules and guidelines of one of the first formal partnerships between architects, theologians, liturgists, artists, and clergy in the United States. Their task was to conceptualize and design both functional and liturgically significant postwar worship spaces. The results of their work are captured well in the results of St. Antony church in Superior—a postwar modernist building much like First Presbyterian Church of Bryan.

Their first rule was that all things must stem from the altar. Presbyterians, as noted earlier, do not use an altar, but rather a table and nevertheless the rule holds true for the reformed as well—that the table is not sideboard and operates as a principle symbol of Christ. It is not mere furniture but is to be freestanding and immediately visible to all. The rule states that it must be at least 3 feet from any wall. This is so that the clergy’s backs will never face the congregation, separating them from the sacrament as in the days prior to the Reformation. “Since the mystical body of Christ is a living, corporate society, the church architecture must possess organic unity… The arrangement of space relations should lend itself to the active participation of the laity in the sacred action of the liturgy.” In First Presbyterian’s chancel (both the original and remodeled), we see the table prominently displayed in the center to be seen by all. All else is to revolve around the table. It for this reason that in most Christian spaces built postwar, that we see the table centrally located and freely standing.

On the table we also see the symbols for Christ in the Alpha and Omega, mirroring those seen in the final window mentioned above. The Alpha being the beginning of the Greek alphabet and the Omega being its end, symbolize that Christ is the first and the last of all things, the beginning and the end of all we know (Revelation 22:13).

Font

The font, used for the sacramental rite of baptism, stands as a symbol of birth anew in Christ. As was Jewish tradition before the time of Jesus as a ritual of cleansing, now it stands in Christianity as a reminder that in baptism we symbolically die to sin (the motion of lowering one into the waters) and rise again made new in Christ. First Presbyterian Church’s baptismal font though portable, is usually placed opposite the pulpit in full view of the congregation on the chancel. Presbyterians in the PC(U.S.A.) also hold that baptism at any age is a public acknowledgment and promise of support in the living of and raising one up within the Christian life and therefore the font finds its home at the liturgical focal point of the sanctuary alongside the table and pulpit. These three symbolize the two sacraments of the Presbyterian tradition and the emphasis on the significance of the spoken Word.

---

Chandeliers
Unexpectedly, and pleasantly surprising, even the chandeliers that line the nave of the sanctuary are rich in theological aesthetics. These ornate fixtures are original and specially designed for First Presbyterian Church of Bryan. It is said that chandeliers within the sacred worship setting “straddle the boundary between the earth and heaven,” and if designed rightly, do not distract from the liturgy, but play a role within it, illuminating the space just as the light of heaven would shine upon the heads of the saints.64 The chandeliers of First Presbyterian Church each feature (from top to bottom) the trinitarian trefoil, royal crowns, merlons and crenels (castle-top edging), quatrefoils, Renaissance archways, and 12 bunches of grapes.

The trefoil is a symbol made of three circles that when imagined, overlap one another just as is the nature of the triune God65. In a circle there is not beginning or end, no sharp edges or twisted turns. The circle is the symbol of God’s standing outside of time, sovereign and perfect. The circles overlap one another to demonstrate a homoousios nature. Homoousios is a term coined at the council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. meaning of the same substance; the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are all one in the same, yet the same in three.

The royal crown stands for Christ’s kingship over all the heavens and the earth as was given to him in his ascension (Matthew 28:18). It is this belief that has caused kings to fall to their knees in prayer, for pastors through the ages to defy tyranny, and for the church to stand even in places of great persecution.

The merlons and crenels that line the top of the chandeliers also point to Christ as king, Lord of all. His kingdom is near to us, even in this place. Upon castles, these structures would serve to protect those within from attack. That is what God’s love does for us. In God we are protected, much like the ribs of an ark would shield those caught in the unrest of a great storm.

The quatrefoils under the merlons and crenels stand for the four gospel writers. Each leaf dedicated to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each writer stands in conversation with the other, and each stems from the same goodness found in the same God.

---

Beneath the quatrefoils we see a Renaissance archway lined with two more trefoils in the corners. These pointed doorways were unique to the time of the Reformation, seen as an aesthetic improvement over the Romanesque archways that relied upon a single keystone. It may be speculated that this detail was included in the crafting of the chandeliers as a symbol of the beginnings of Reformed Presbyterianism.

Finally, backlit in red, the grapes hang as a reminder of Christ’s blood shed for us for the forgiveness of sin. Each chandelier has six sides to it, each side hosting two bunches of grapes. When 12 bunches of grapes are presented in the same location, they symbolize the 12 apostles66.

First Presbyterian Church of Bryan’s Formative Aesthetics in Summary of the 1966 Congregation and Today

From these symbols presented, we see a congregation from 1966 that valued the sovereignty of God in the royalty of Jesus and the many symbols of the trinity. The people valued the love given in God through the sacraments and the story of God in relationship with God’s people as seen in the covenant windows and the positioning of the Word via the pulpit, Communion table, and Baptismal Font in an accessible chancel that invites all people into participation in the liturgy. In turn, these symbols over time have inspired people in awe and wonder to be drawn into deeper contemplation of God’s works and will for us. This is especially true of the covenant windows, which even in 2020 are continuing to inspire us in new ways as we connect our faith and the world through the stories presented.

Though we no longer use the Covenant Life Curriculum, this congregation has discovered that its effects linger on in the symbols that surround us. We are consistently called carry our faith beyond the walls as is the very goal of the artist who creates beauty—to inspire and nurture the faith formation of the one who would come upon it and be compelled into worship of God. In short, we can confidently affirm that the architects and artists who worked in collaboration with the pastors, committees, and people inspired by the theology of Covenant Life, truly created theological aesthetics that reflect the glory of God and stand timeless and effective still this day.

---

CONCLUSION

Throughout history, we see significant shifts in the style and function of church architecture dependent upon the state of society. From before Christ until now, it has been understood that God is not limited to any building, but the building should honor the purposes of praising God so that believers may find connection with Him in a dedicated space set apart from the secular for prayer and adoration. The space must exist as an Ebenezer; a living stone, a place that speaks, and a place that serves. Beginning with the catacombs, theological aesthetics emerge in permanent spaces with artwork and fixtures meant to point us to God in ways of prayer, praise, and wonder. As church architecture blossomed in form through the Renaissance, the incredible dedication on the part of artists, architects, liturgists, and believers has constituted some of the most awe-inspiring structures still standing today, attracting millions every year to gaze upon each detail, mouths open in wonder of God’s glory told before them. Through beauty in theological aesthetics, the church speaks as living stone, but also, as was noted very strongly in the Reformation, the church building shall do more than speak; it shall serve and be formational.

The functional elements of the pulpit, table, and font arranged on an open chancel, visible to all, serve the people in worship, knowledge, and wisdom through the Word and accessible sacraments. Perhaps where the early Presbyterians such as Calvin and Knox and those of other Reformed denominations fell short in their theory regarding religious artwork, was that theological aesthetics in symbol and visible didactic story also serve to the formation of Christians of all ages. The glory of God is not something only to be shared with the auditory learner but can also be experienced by the visible and kinesthetic learners through art, space, sound, and light. Just as Psalm 38:4 says to taste and see that the Lord is good, so too shall we see that the beauty as reflected glory of the Lord can be good also. This is where the building and the designs made therein can serve to aid the worshipper in being brought into a state of wonder, praise, and prayer.

This was realized as the Reformed church in the United States was more able to set permanent roots and give energy, imagination, hope, and love to the process of creating a space worth calling a living stone. “Christ gives to the church all the gifts necessary to be his body.”67 It can be argued in agreement with Pope St. John Paul II that Christ passes on divine inspiration to the architect and the artist and those who work in partnership to create living houses of prayer. “With loving regard, the divine Artist passes on to the human artist a spark of His own surpassing wisdom, calling him or her to share in His creative power.”68 Through images and carvings made not to be themselves praised, but used as tools for learning, inspiring, or imagining, Christians of all ages and ability levels can come together in worship, steeped into an atmosphere that speaks to the ways in which we experience God’s glory here and now.

First Presbyterian Church of Bryan is a product of her time, a radical statement that God is the God of here and now, alive and among us, but she also stands timeless with symbols that anchor her congregation to their faith roots that would also dare the believer to encounter them again and again in new ways, always being formed and reformed in the living Spirit of Christ. Just as the 11th covenant window points us to the places we have been, in Jesus’ eyes and gestures we are called forth to see where he may lead us next. Liturgical architecture and aesthetics speak to the faith understanding of the day, but they shall also compel us to keep our eyes on the horizon for the next thing God is doing. The Covenant Life Curriculum that not only inspired the lives of FPC’s congregation, but bled into the colors of the windows, the designs of the chandeliers, the ornate carvings on the pews, and within the design of the chancel, speaks to a cyclical relationship between the gospel being known and the life being inspired.

First Presbyterian stands as a whole—a symbol of God’s covenant relationship with us, from her bold exterior to the roses on the pulpit, to the spirit of her congregation. Beauty comes in many forms and when created well and furthermore understood, beauty works in ways that feed the desire of the heart to seek God anew each day. These places are made holy and living not by the bricks and mortar that form them, but by the beauty both found in their walls and made within the hearts of those who fill that space in prayer and adoration. The glory of God reflected is the definition of beauty and when it is prevalent in a well-kept sacred place of prayer, so too will it be prevalent in the hearts of the people who frequent that space.

Liturgical Architecture and symbolic theological aesthetics have the power in their divinely inspired beauty to transform entire generations just as the Word spoken and read. As we go forward from postwar modernism into the recent and new ages to come, may we bear in mind that we did not stay in the tabernacle forever, but we have found new ways to express the majesty of God’s glory. God is alive and moves and dwells with us in ways meant to guide us into covenant life with Him. May the beauty we have known serve to inspire us and may we be moved in the Spirit to celebrate beauty in its many forms and in turn be formed anew among it in the ways of Christ, our savior. May the church erect an Ebenezer, no matter its form, a living stone, a reflection of God’s glory that would inspire every mouth to open in songs of praise and whispers of prayer, to be a light in the darkness of the world. Wherever we may venture forth from here, let us always be mindful to nurture faith, encourage hope, inspire love, and demonstrate witness, for that is how the church shall serve and those are the things which make for beauty. The world is in dire need of spaces to encounter the sacred. May beauty serve to be that space in all the ways she speaks.
Bibliography


*All photos of First Presbyterian Church of Bryan were taken by Rev. Emily K. Béghin or provided within archive materials with no photography credit available.*