

THE CHURCH'S FORGOTTEN SOUL:
A SONATA FOR BEAUTY
IN THE
CHRISTIAN CHURCH (DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the

Brite Divinity School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Theology in History and Theology

Fort Worth, TX

April 2014

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To two of my grandfathers,

John H. Cartwright and Byron A. Lamun

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I. INTRODUCTION

There is a significant problem in the Church in the present-day. I am not speaking of the rapid decline of churchgoers in North America or the devaluing that the church has undergone in mainstream culture since its post-World War II peak, nor am I speaking of the ever-growing category of the “spiritual-but-not-religious.” While these are all important problems that should receive attention (and it is possible that the problem I am addressing here, if carefully and seriously addressed, could have a positive impact on those others as well), the problem I am speaking of is a problem of soul. The Church has lost its soul or, at least, forgotten it.

I will address what I mean by soul more carefully below, but it should be noted that the soul I am speaking of is not the Platonic idea that tends towards division between soul and body. Rather, I am speaking of the soul as the way by which we recognize and appreciate beauty. Soul is what gives the Church an ability to recognize beauty, in its worship, mission, and especially in its theology. My argument, therefore, will be three-fold: First, I will diagnose the problem of soul within the history of the Church; then, I will bring beauty to the foreground and begin constructing a theology of beauty; and, finally I will offer three case studies that could help begin the process of re-souling the Church. These three chapters will be organized in a format borrowed from large-scale musical works from the early Classical period—the sonata form. In this sonata, I will begin with the Exposition, which will introduce the basic materials of my argument, namely the understanding of soul and possible reasons why this soul has been forgotten. In the Development, these themes will be elaborated and juxtaposed with themes of beauty and theology. And, finally, in the Recapitulation, these themes will be influential as I look to the possibilities for how the Church can begin to remember its soul through a theology of beauty.

It is my hope for this paper to serve as a call to remembrance for a Church that I love deeply. I am an ordained minister within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and a life-long “Disciple,” so “Church” in the context of this paper means the general body of this particular denomination, although I do believe there will be great resonances with other denominations who are also struggling with a lack of soul and, subsequently, a lack of beauty. As an entry point for my argument, it might be helpful to offer some insights to my own experience in Church and how my experiences have led me to this particular problem of the church.

I like to say that I was born into Church, specifically the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As the daughter of two ministers, I spent an extraordinary amount of time at church throughout my young life and have participated in all kinds of church activities, committees, worship leadership roles, and other parts of church life. As I grew up in church, I became more and more aware that the parts I liked best about church were the creative and artistic ones – the congregation singing hymns during worship, looking at the stained glass windows that surrounded the sanctuary, hearing the stories and poems that were included in the sermon, performing in the children’s programs, and helping to decorate the sanctuary for each liturgical season. These things encouraged participation and pushed the congregation to work together while making something beautiful happen, even if it was only for a brief amount of time. I do not remember hearing, within the congregational context, the reasoning behind *why* we did these things, although I definitely had those conversations with my minister-parents.

In high school, I continued being actively involved with the church in a variety of ways, but I also began seeking other creative opportunities outside the church structure. At that point, the Arts and the Church were two separate things that, although they shared some similar

features and had points of contact, remained separated from one another. Continuing my love of the Arts, I studied theatre and music in college; immersing myself within this creative world I had never really imagined possible. I sang in choirs, played in bands, performed in musicals and concerts of all kinds, and much more. The communities that were formed in the midst of the creation of an artistic endeavor reminded me of what church sometimes felt like, when it was also working towards some—usually creative—endeavor. The difference was that the artistic communities, groups of college students and faculty, recognized the meaning and significance of what we were doing. We knew at least some of the history of the craft, the reasoning behind the set, costumes, music, or dance, and we would have the deep conversations about meaning where we were allowed to ask questions of our characters, melodies, stage cues, etc. We were informed participants and at least some of the audiences of those many concert, shows, and performances, were informed as well.

Compared to this new world in which I found myself, the church seemed a barren and desolate place that lived in fear of asking questions and was so inwardly focused that its heart and soul were no longer functioning properly. I moved to New York City ready to pursue my own artistic and creative endeavors, but ended up finding myself in another brand new world: a church that was not afraid to take the risks of art and theology and that incorporated the Arts within the life and worship of the congregation. Park Avenue Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was very much alive and flourishing and a very receptive place for artistic talents. I found myself singing in the gospel and chancel choirs, serving on the worship and theatre committees, performing in an off-off-Broadway musical produced by a company housed in the church, and engaged in conversations about how the Arts were included in worship and how they engaged the community.

It was not long into my membership at this church that I began hearing God calling me into ministry, particularly into ministry of the Arts. I entered the Masters of Divinity program at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, TX and also had the opportunity to serve in ministry in a few Disciples congregations. While I was learning the history of the church (both the broader Church and my own denomination) and the history of the rituals of worship in my classes at Brite, I found it difficult to fully incorporate this learning into practical ministry. In my experience, it seemed as if Disciples congregations preferred to maintain traditions developed within individual congregations, even if these had no theological or historical significance. “That’s the way we’ve always done it,” became the phrase that meant my creativity and excitement about worship and the arts was unwelcome. Again, I found myself in the barren desert of Church that had forgotten its soul, forgotten how to recognize beauty.

In visiting with my colleagues at Brite and other seminaries and churches, I have come to the conclusion that loss of soul is a very common problem within Disciples congregations and within many congregations outside this denomination. The Church has lost something of great worth, our ability to recognize and understand the beauty of the church. We’ve forgotten the reasoning behind the rituals and traditions of worship and church life and have closed our hearts to new ways of living out those rituals and traditions, ways that are inspired by creativity and imagination and the Arts. As generation after generation of churchgoers have found the church more and more ravaged by this aesthetic amnesia, the congregants themselves have lost this depth of connection with the meaning and the significance of what is supposed to be represented in worship and church life.

If we do not begin recovering this now, what will happen to the church? What will happen to those beauty-filled rituals and traditions that make up our history? What will happen to

the younger generations of the church who have not been taught how to dream and imagine and sense beauty beyond the superficial reality of everyday life? What will happen to the older generations who no longer feel that church is as important and meaningful as it once was? What will happen when all memory of what church is supposed to be striving for is forgotten? We must begin attuning ourselves again to our rich history of aesthetical meaning and significance. To do this we must first realize what we have lost or forgotten somewhere along the way, we must identify what beauty means and represents for the church, and then we must reintegrate the church with the soul that has been forgotten.

II. EXPOSITION

The Forgotten Soul

“The greatest malady of the twentieth century, implicated in all of our troubles and affecting us individually and socially, is ‘loss of soul,’”¹ begins Thomas Moore in his book *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life*, published in 1992. He goes on to say that the precise definition of soul is impossible to pinpoint as definition is an intellectual ambition and the soul prefers imagination. However, he offers an imprecise definition:

We know intuitively that soul has to do with genuineness and depth, as when we say certain music has soul or a remarkable person is soulful. When you look closely at the image of soulfulness, you see that it is tied to life in all its particular aspects—good food, satisfying conversation, genuine friends, and experiences that stay in the memory and touch the heart. Soul is revealed in attachment, love, and community, as well as in retreat on behalf of inner communing and intimacy.²

The concept of “soul,” like the concept of beauty, has been debated by scholars and theologians since before Christendom and has been given a wide variety of definitions and explanations from scholars from a plethora of subjects and areas of study. Thomas Moore is one of many who engage in talk of soul care in terms of spirituality. Others come from philosophy, religion, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and more. With each reincarnation, the definition of soul may change depending upon the argument, giving strength to the lines in Mary Oliver’s poem, “Maybe:” “Nobody knows what the soul is / it comes and goes / like the wind over the water.”³

¹ Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness in Everyday Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), xi.

² Ibid, xi-xii.

³ Mary Oliver, “Maybe,” in Robert Bly, Ed., *The Soul Is Here For Its Own Joy: Sacred Poems From Many Cultures* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1995), 15.

From Moore's brief glimpse of soul, we can see that it has something to do with integration that involves all aspects of a person and also their community. "Just as soul food and soul music are grounded in particular cultures," writes David Benner, living soulfully is "grounded in one's unique heritage and culture." These form part of the soul's reality and when contact with this grounding is lost, "...we are doomed to a life of pretense. Soulful living calls us to remember who we are and where we have come from."⁴ Part of my argument that the Church has lost or forgotten its soul, particularly in terms of its recognition of beauty, is caused by this loss of contact with our heritage and culture. Below, I will offer possible causes for this loss of contact, but first I want to dig deeper into what integration means in terms of soul and try to identify a more precise concept of what the soul is.

There are two definitions of soul that have had the most influence on talk of soul throughout history—those of Plato and his student Aristotle. Plato believed the soul to be incorporeal and, therefore, separate and distinct from the body. This belief has greatly influenced Western theology and has been the preference of the Church because of its understanding of the soul as immortal. However, this view has led to a dualistic understanding of soul and body with the soul as good and the body as evil. This dualistic mindset has often pitted the earthly world against the heavenly world since, if the body is evil, the world in which the body exists must also be evil. Many of the early Church Fathers found resonance in this dualism, like Origen (185-254) who believed bodily existence was a result of the soul being tested or punished by God.

Similarly influential, though generally less recognized, is Aristotle's understanding of the soul as inseparable from the body. Instead of a dualistic idea of soul and body, the soul and body are both part of a unified substantial reality and the soul is not a thing but the "vital principle"

⁴ David G. Benner, *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 50.

that makes the body alive.⁵ Paul, as well as the Early Church Fathers, had to wrestle with these Greek influences while attempting to articulate their thoughts on the spiritual nature of a person and the question of immortality. Many found themselves incorporating parts of both, such as Augustine (354-430) who understood the body and soul to be created in union by God but with the soul as an active participant and the body as a passive one.⁶ In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas took up Aristotle's understanding of soul and elaborated on the necessary requirement of bodily existence in order for a soul to exist as well as the understanding of soul as the unity of matter and form, the materiality of the world and the human body.⁷ It is Aquinas's understanding of the soul as integration, based on Aristotle and further outlined by Michael Demkovitch, that I will draw upon here.

A great deal is implied when the soul is understood as integration, rather than as a distinct object within a person. Along with rejecting the dualistic notion of body and soul, this view rejects the understanding of the world, a material extension of bodily existence, as conflicting with the divine. This principle of integration, according to Demkovitch, is consistent with the theology of divine Incarnation,⁸ as is indicated in the gospel of John: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us..."⁹ We will return to this theme later, but it is also important to note here that the human soul not only integrates material and nonmaterial, divine and non-divine, but it also integrates "...one's spatial, temporal, historical, material as well as any other additional

⁵ Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *Rise and Fall of Soul and Self: An Intellectual History of Personal Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 21.

⁶ Michael Demkovich, *A Soul-Centered Life: Exploring an Animated Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 63-65.

⁷ Ibid, 81.

⁸ Ibid, 22-23.

⁹ John 1: 14 (NRSV).

nonmaterial (or nonphysical) realities of authentic human existence (love, hope, faith).”¹⁰

Therefore the soul is not only the “...integrating principle of one’s particular existence but it is also the motivating life principle of personal human existence.”¹¹ The soul engages in a process of knowing and desiring: knowing is enacted in an intellectual process directed towards understanding and meaning making while desiring is enacted in a moral-volitional process directed towards what is good.¹² Aquinas also recognized the necessity for the second component—knowledge—as well as the initial desire. In his *Summa Theologiae*, he writes that something good is also something beautiful because they both possess form, which is one of his criteria for beauty. However, he adds that they are not synonymous because something good, that which everyone desires, requires purpose whereas beauty “has to do with knowledge...”¹³ Here, we can see that Aquinas was also engaged in the realm of aesthetics and I will use his understanding of beauty as form to begin building a theology of beauty in the next chapter. Here it is important to recognize that my argument is centered on the notion that beauty is a key way in which the soul recognizes what is good and, as part of its integrative process, the soul seeks to understand what is good or beautiful and give it meaning.

When this concept of soul is applied to the Church, what I am intending to convey are the same faculties of the individual soul: knowing and desiring, desiring and knowing. The Church as the Body of Christ yearns for what is beautiful and good (the Good News) and also yearns to understand what is beautiful and good, to know what it means in relationship to the Creator and

¹⁰ Demkovich, *A Soul-Centered Life*, 23.

¹¹ Ibid, 24.

¹² Ibid, 25.

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, vol. 2, Existence and Nature of God (Ia. 2-11)*, trans. And ed. Timothy McDermott (London: Blackfriars, 1964), 71-73.

Creation. In the introduction to *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, editor Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen writes:

The magnitude of beauty in nature and in all human creation, wherever it is experienced, gives us a glimpse of the beauty of God, therein lies its saving power. In this way beauty becomes a way to God and a manifestation of God at the same time. God's beauty is what draws us to God, and this includes the mystery and glory of Christ on the cross, the utter distortion of divine-human beauty and yet its complete fulfillment. This paradox is the basis of Christian faith and cannot be overlooked...¹⁴

But beauty has been overlooked and thus the process of knowing and desiring, the work of the soul, has also been overlooked. Before we begin unpacking the theological implications of beauty, let us turn to some possibilities of why the Church has forgotten this essential piece of its soul.

Despite the fascination with beauty evidenced in the writings of Early Church Fathers such as Justin Martyr and Augustine and medieval authors like Thomas Aquinas, according to Edward Farley, it has "...from the outset...never held a very firm position in the Christian movement."¹⁵ It was only through poetic, visual, and musical arts that beauty managed to have a foothold within Christianity, and even then "...its status is always shaky and problematic."¹⁶ There are several possibilities that serve as contributing factors for the exclusion of beauty from the Church. Three of the most prominent possibilities are the iconoclastic attitudes of monotheism, the secularization of culture, and the separation of aesthetics from other disciplines.

Iconoclastic attitudes have existed within the Christian movement since its beginnings. In the writings of the Church Fathers, there are many cautions about the dangers of art, especially

¹⁴ Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, ed., *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 6.

¹⁵ Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2001), 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

pictorial art. Possible dangers included superstition, idolatry, and syncretism.¹⁷ The 8th and 9th centuries also saw continued conflict about images, specifically focused on representations of Christ and whether or not the veneration of images was acceptable or not.¹⁸ The Protestant Reformation was another instance of conflict concerning the use of images in the Church, but there were many other issues at stake as well. Gerardus van der Leeuw writes:

The Humanistic Enlightenment, with its views that God is too exalted to be represented; its fidelity to the Bible, which values the respect paid to the letter of the Old Testament prohibitions; its ecstatic personalization, which endures neither constraint for image nor sacrament; the protest of the poor against the riches of the Church—all of this together had the effect first of destroying images and then shunning them more or less rigorously.¹⁹

Richard Viladesau adds that there was also an emphasis, on the part of the Reformers, towards the primacy of the Word even despite the argument that images helped educate non-literate people.²⁰ These iconoclastic attitudes can be seen as a result of Plato's soul-body dualism that was mentioned above. The Greeks were considered by monotheists to be impure in their worship of multiple Gods and also the seeds of body negativity that had been planted blossomed into a great fear of bodily pleasure, including that which might be experienced from earthly materials.²¹ The "monotheistic revolution," as Farley calls it, cast aside any ideas of God acting or speaking through aesthetics, and therefore beauty.²²

¹⁷ Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 53.

¹⁸ Ibid, 54.

¹⁹ Gerardus Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 185.

²⁰ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 55.

²¹ Van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, 53-55.

²² Farley, *Faith and Beauty*, 10.

The secularization of culture is another possibility for the beauty's exclusion from the Church and also from other realms of study. Philosopher theologian Patrick Sherry observes in *Spirit and Beauty* that, "It is commonly said nowadays that beauty is simply a matter of what pleases us, that what pleases people differs from individual to individual and culture to culture..."²³ In other words, beauty is considered to be a subjective reality that has more to do with the observer of beauty than the object of beauty that one might observe.²⁴ This kind of thought finds its roots in the hands of Kant and other prominent scholars of the Enlightenment. Frank Burch Brown indicates that the tendency towards secularization stems from the Renaissance and leads to an "aesthetic purism" that removes any hint of religion from aesthetics and vice versa.²⁵

Whether the roots of secularization can be found in the Renaissance or the Enlightenment, the effects are clearly seen in the following centuries. Writing at the end of the 20th century, Elaine Scarry recognizes that beauty has been banished from recognition and open dialogue within the humanities—not the beautiful things themselves but any talk of them.²⁶ "In postmodern societies," Edward Farley writes, "beauty may not have completely disappeared from language, but it is not a self-evident and important value by which postmoderns understand, experience or interpret their world."²⁷ The relegation of beauty to the sidelines is, "...part of a

²³ Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 2nd ed. (Wales, Great Britain: SCM Press, 2002), 21.

²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 42-55.

²⁵ Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics: A Theological Study of Making and Meaning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 5-6.

²⁶ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), 57.

²⁷ Farley, *Faith and Beauty*, 2.

larger story, the trivialization of everyday life by the near loss of many ‘deep symbols’ or cultural values such as ‘real’, the holy, tradition, nature, obligation, and law.”²⁸ Another philosopher, Augustinius Wucherer-Huldenfeld, also sees that:

...Aesthetics as developed from the Enlightenment definition presupposed a Cartesian division between mind (spirit) and body. It confined aesthetics to the latter sphere, and defined beauty as the object of such aesthetics. This led to the “scientific” (*wissenschaftlich*) canonization of the “vulgar misunderstanding of the beautiful,” with the concurrent loss of the ontological sense of beauty and its eventual reduction to a product to be “consumed.”²⁹

David Bentley Hart identifies this loss of beauty as “the modern disenchantment” that can represent beauty as something of an event that can be understood, but prevents a meaningful understanding of the word “beauty” itself. The word “...*indicates* nothing; neither exactly a quality, nor a property, nor a function, nor even really a subjective reaction to an object or occurrence, it offers no phenomenological purchase upon aesthetic experience.”³⁰ Yet Hart insists “nothing else impresses itself upon our attention with at once so wonderful a power and so evocative an immediacy.”³¹ Beauty is something that is absolutely present, something that is known over and over again, but “...in a way that defies description and denial with equal impertinence.”³²

Assisting in this removal of the language of beauty from culture and the heritage of the Church is a third possibility—the isolation of aesthetics from other disciplines. Hans Urs von

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics*, 6.

³⁰ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 3.

³¹ Ibid, 16.

³² Ibid.

Balthasar points to “the attainment of independent status for aesthetics” as the reason for the decline of aesthetics within the academic arena because it isolated aesthetics from the disciplines of logic and ethics. Instead of “total integration within the one, the true, and the good in the Greeks and in earlier theology,” aesthetics “was given a particular value of its own.” Although there are exceptions, such as Jonathan Edwards and von Balthasar, prior to the last decades of the 20th century, “...beauty is a rarity in the 2000 years of the Christian interpretation of the gospel.”³³

Disciples’ theology has also suffered from aesthetic amnesia and, even in the midst of the current excitement about beauty and aesthetics in academia; there has been a lack of attention to beauty in practical theology or in the living out of faith. This is not to say, however, that beauty is never mentioned or is understood negatively. I believe beauty has fallen through the cracks of our attention and a great opportunity has been missed. It will be my intention in the next chapter to develop a theology of beauty than can offer to Disciples a new vitality and integration of the soul. However, before I do this, I have two further thoughts about the soul as the entryway for beauty within the Church.

First, the concepts of beauty and soul have suffered similar displacement within history—both Christian and secular. As Thomas Moore indicated, there has been a great “loss of soul” that has affected nearly every area of life and learning. Parker Palmer suggests that there are two cultural reasons why negligent attention has been paid to soul: secularism and moralism. Secularism, “...which regards the human self as a social construct with no created core,” and moralism, “...which regards all concern for self as ‘selfish,’” both lead to a place of “denial of

³³ Farley, 7.

the true self.”³⁴ This denial translates into a loss of attention to the soul and the soul, according to Mary Oliver, is built entirely out of attentiveness.³⁵ In *Soulful Spirituality: Becoming Fully Alive and Deeply Human*, David Benner asserts that attentiveness is what “...allows us to live in places of depth where life can become its own meaning.”³⁶ He adds that a lack of attentiveness “...dooms us to live in shallow places that deprive the soul of the essential ingredient that it needs to thrive: contact with reality. When we fail to pay attention, we inevitably end up living soullessly.”³⁷ Part of the task in remembering (or learning for the first time) our aesthetic soul is to become attentive to the beauty that is already within our faith and traditions. I will return to this later.

Second, as I call the Church to remember its soul, it is not a call to remember a specific time or place in history when the Church’s soul was successfully integrated with concepts of the good and the beautiful but a calling for the Church to recognize its potential for beauty that has been present all along. Obviously, there have been times when the Church is more prone to thoughts of this sort, but those times were neither free of other conflicts nor alienation from other soul connections. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has never fully embraced a concept of beauty in a way that is understood theologically or practically, even though the founders of this movement were influenced in their theology and practice by Jonathan Edwards’ theology of beauty. Therefore, I am calling us to remember our soul by fully embracing beauty in the life of the Church. I am calling us to embrace what is possible—and has been possible—within the

³⁴ Parker Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life: Welcoming the Soul and Weaving Community in a Wounded World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 35.

³⁵ Mary Oliver, “Low Tide,” *Amicus Journal* (Winter 2001): 34.

³⁶ Benner, *Soulful Spirituality*, 96.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Church, and I believe this will offer a new vitality to the life of the Body of Christ. Our aesthetic amnesia has, in my opinion, limited the Church's processes of both knowing and desiring and it has limited the Church's capacity for soulful living.

III. DEVELOPMENT

A Disciples Theology of Beauty

In the previous chapter, we saw that there are several possibilities for why beauty has been forgotten within the Church. Most rejection of beauty finds its roots in Plato's dualistic thinking about the body and soul. When beauty is perceived solely as a material object, there is a theological concern that this beauty might inspire a negative or sinful desiring. As a result, beauty, and subsequently, the soul, has been slowly forgotten within the Church. In order to reconstruct a theology that is focused on beauty, we must first embark on the task of defining the seemingly indefinable concept of beauty.

WHAT IS BEAUTY?

Merriam-Webster defines "beauty" first as: "The quality or aggregate of qualities in a person or thing that gives pleasure to the senses or pleasurably exalts the mind or spirit."³⁸ Here, beauty is an unidentified quality (or qualities) that is known to be beautiful by the response it evokes—pleasure—or by the impact it has—exalting the mind or spirit. This suggests, like we have from many voices mentioned previously, that beauty is an *experience*. It involves a dual process of desiring and knowing. We can see this in the work of several recent scholars.

In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Scarry describes three key features of beauty: first, beauty must be sacred; it must also be unprecedented³⁹; and, finally, it must be lifesaving.⁴⁰ Scarry

³⁸ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/> (accessed on March 1, 2014).

³⁹ Scarry, *On Beauty*, 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 24.

admits that the first two attributes she gives are closely related, for one might describe something as “sacred” in the same way one would describe the moment when:

...The ‘unprecedented’ suddenly comes before one, and...the mind, despite the confidently announced mimesis of carrying out a search, does not actually enter into any such search, for it is too exclusively filled with the beautiful object that stands in its presence. It is the very way the beautiful thing fills the mind and breaks all frames that gives the ‘never before in the history of the world’ feeling.⁴¹

The third feature—that beauty is lifesaving—is more in line with being life-affirming or life renewing. Scarry cites Homer, Augustine, and Proust as making similar statements of beauty.

But there is more to these three features that helps in recognizing beauty. Scarry elaborates on particular responses that these features of beauty evoke, including: inspiring replication or begetting, evoking an impulse toward distribution, and as inciting deliberation. In the first two, we begin to see some ethical implications of beauty. The third invites reflection that goes beyond the object of beauty and its specific circumstance to something deeper.⁴² The beautiful object inspires the mind to look “...with a kind of urgency as though one’s life depended on it...”⁴³ for what is, ultimately, truth. “What is beautiful is in league with what is true because truth abides in the immortal sphere,”⁴⁴ Scarry explains.

...The beautiful person or thing incites in us the longing for truth because it provides by its compelling ‘clear discernibility’ and introduction (perhaps even our first introduction) to the state of certainty yet does not itself satiate our desire for certainty since beauty, sooner or later, brings us into contact with our own capacity for making errors. The beautiful, almost without any effort of our own, acquaints us with the mental event of conviction, and so pleasurable a mental state is this that ever afterwards one is willing to labor, struggle, wrestle with the world to locate enduring sources of conviction—to locate what is true.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid, 22-23.

⁴² Ibid, 29.

⁴³ Ibid, 30.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 31.

Not only does beauty exist in the same plane as truth, but it also is an inspiration for discovering truth. For Christians, the truth to which beauty points can be recognized as something of God and of God's good creation. Whereas Scarry writes from a secular standpoint that only mentions and hints at something immortal or divine, David Bentley Hart, in his comprehensive theology of beauty, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, argues that beauty as "inseparable from truth," might be exactly what can be understood as theologically true.⁴⁶ Instead of a list of qualities of beauty or responses to it, Hart offers six themes of beauty that compose a "general 'thematics' of the beautiful."⁴⁷ First, beauty is objective in that "...there is no objective *thing* that can be isolated, described, and quantified in the manifold experience whose name is beauty."⁴⁸ Second, beauty is the true form of distance, residing within it and also belonging to it, possessing it, and giving distance.⁴⁹ The third theme that Hart describes is that beauty evokes desire. He offers two reasons for this:

First, beauty is not simply the invention of a fecund, unpremeditated, spontaneous exuberance of will, a desire that preexists and predisposes the object of its velleity or appetite (as certain contemporary schools of thought suggest), but precedes and elicits desire, supplicates and commands it (often in vain), and gives shape to the will that receives it. Second, it is genuinely desire, and not some ideally disinterested and dispirited state of contemplation, that beauty both calls for and answers to: though not a coarse, impoverished desire to consume and dispose, but a desire made full at a distance, dwelling alongside what is loved and possessed in the intimacy of dispossession.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 3.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 17.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 18.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 19.

Hart's fourth theme is that beauty crosses boundaries. He explains that beauty "...crosses every boundary, traverses every series, and so manifests the God who transcends every division – including, again, that between the transcendent and the immanent."⁵¹ The fifth theme is that beauty's authority guards against any tendency towards Gnosticism in theology.⁵² Hart believes that "...worldly beauty shows creation to be the real theater of divine glory..."—that is, creation actively participates in God's beauty—and also that the world is "...unnecessary, an expression of divine glory that is free, framed for God's pleasure, and so neither a defining moment in the consciousness of God nor the consequence of some defect of fall within the divine."⁵³ Here we see the further rejection of the soul-body duality initiated by Plato as well as an understanding of beauty that is essentially and inextricably part of God's glory and creation's goodness. Hart's last theme is that beauty resists reduction to the "symbolic."⁵⁴ He retains a symbolism that "...lies in the immediacy of a certain splendor, radiance, mystery, or allure," but also recognizes that "...the symbol is that which arrests the force of the aesthetic, the continuity of the surface, in order to disclose 'depths'." He does not want the particularities of the Christian faith to be removed from their contexts and "...dissolved into universal truths of human experience."⁵⁵ "The 'symbol' extracted from the complexities of its many contexts," he writes, "is...the paralysis of beauty."⁵⁶

⁵¹ Ibid, 21.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, 21.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 24.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 27.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 27-28.

Hart is one of several theologians who are bringing new life to the concept of beauty in theology in the twenty-first century. His theology of beauty points the way towards recognition that beauty and the aesthetic experience are intrinsic to human life, although there are some contradictions with mainline Protestant theology as Hart writes from an Eastern Orthodox perspective. William Dyrness points to some limitations of Hart's conception of beauty: Hart's focus on gaze and the participation of creation with the Creator. "Over against typical Protestant theology...it is the gaze, vision, that controls his theology."⁵⁷ This gaze, which Hart conceives of as always positively positioned towards God, "...leads to the creature's participation in God, the fountainhead of all being."⁵⁸ Gaze and participation in God are both dependent on what Hart perceives as creations' desire for beauty. It is desire that gives an entry point for beauty in Hart's theology. He believes that "...desire is the energy of our movement, and so of our being"⁵⁹ and also that this desire "...corresponds to the call of God."⁶⁰ Desire, because it is not disinterested, is therefore moral. However, Dyrness also points to a weakness of Hart's conception of desire:

...Desire cannot be simply affirmed without qualification, because it can seek the wrong object; the gaze, after all, can *become*, controlling. A weakness of Hart's bracing vision is that the creature seems always drawn toward the light as an incontrovertible fact rather than a broken possibility. For Hart, sin is merely the suppression of the gift, something which dulls the senses, rather than any active disobedience or rebellion. But if this is so, how do we account for the evil so visible on every hand?...A simple appeal to beauty is insufficient—God's presence cannot be directly discerned in a fallen world; it must be appropriated through the uncertainties and struggles of living by faith.⁶¹

⁵⁷ William A. Dyrness, *Poetic Theology: God and the Poetics of Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 123.

⁵⁸ Hart, 144.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 190.

⁶⁰ Dyrness, 121.

⁶¹ Ibid, 123-4.

Hart's notion of desire makes great use of the work of Thomas Aquinas, which we encountered in the previous chapter. Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the soul is rooted in integration, but he also recognizes that the soul requires a dual-process of knowing and desiring. Once the experience of beauty is located in the *habitus* of knowledge, Aquinas could understand why beauty is a pleasure: "Human knowing is driven by desire for the real and the good. That which can fulfill that desire in contemplative knowledge is either a sense object in-formed by some degree of proportion or a formal object, proportion itself."⁶²

For theologians such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the thing that fulfills the desire and the form that beauty is expressed in is the glory of God. For Barth, God's self-revealing is beautiful and thus the trinity must also be beautiful "...since God's self-manifestation is immanent and eternal in God's triune being."⁶³ This seemingly leads to an understanding of beauty that can be found throughout the gospel and the Church, however, Barth remained very hesitant in naming anything other than God beautiful. His concern about aesthetics is quite understandable when one recognizes the context in which he is writing. Von Balthasar, on the other hand, does recognize beauty throughout faith and gospel. He understands divine beauty to be the "...manner in which God's goodness shares itself, the splendour (cf. Thomas Aquinas) of divine truth and the goodness that makes these things attractive."⁶⁴ Yet he pushes Aquinas' concept of form so that it is not the form itself that is beautiful but the depth and mystery behind it. Here we see some resonance with Hart and von Balthasar also focuses in on the particularity of Jesus. The particular form of Jesus—his life, ministry, death, and

⁶² Farley, *Faith and Beauty*, 22.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 73.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 75.

resurrection—“...displays the true form of the human being, a beautiful and lovable mode of existence...” whose depth is divine love. This particular form gives space for the spirit “...as a kind of eternal light of God shining through the human soul—[to be] the glory of the form of the Servant.”⁶⁵ In explaining von Balthasar’s understanding of beauty, Farley continues:

Thus, beginning with the beauty of the divine self-manifestation and the radiation of the splendour of God, von Balthasar has found a way of discovering how that splendour determined, and reappears in creation, history, incarnation, the human form, and redemption. He can discover beauty in all these things precisely because beauty is not just the formal attractiveness of God’s self-manifestation but form as spirit and a sign of the loving mystery of God which not only manifests itself but appears and is embodied in the incarnation, the Church, and redemption.⁶⁶

The project of constructing a theology of beauty for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is helped immensely by the entry for beauty offered by Barth and the creative potential of von Balthasar’s understanding of beauty. Yet, Barth’s understanding of beauty has limits and Balthasar’s understanding of beauty does not factor in the possibility of human brokenness or sin, much like Hart. Edward Farley, for example, understands beauty to be “...intrinsic to the life of faith because it is a feature of the divine image that is distorted by sin and restored by redemption.”⁶⁷ It is how beauty manifests itself already in the life of faith that Farley believes should determine theology’s route to beauty.⁶⁸ William Dyrness points out that, for Protestants, an emphasis on human brokenness prevents creation’s complete participation in God as Hart

⁶⁵ Ibid, 77.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 76.

⁶⁷ Farley, *Faith and Beauty*, viii.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 83.

described, but a different kind of participation is available for us—“...one based on the dramatic narrative of the gospel.”⁶⁹ He continues:

That is, our fellowship (*koinonia*) with God and each other is based on our being taken up into the life of God as this was realized in the person of Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that we are enabled to live out in the world the reality of the Gospel. This means that the ‘aesthetics’ of the cross is not evident directly from the narrative of Christ’s death.⁷⁰

Beauty, therefore, is only ‘visible’ through the life and practice of faith because this is our response to the beauty offered by God, Christ, and the gospel. This is, I believe, the beauty already present within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). We will return to these themes of desire and participation in the dramatic narrative as we explore a theology of beauty for the Disciples.

A DISCIPLES THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY

The identity of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), from its origins as a reformatory movement begun by Barton W. Stone and Thomas Campbell and Alexander Campbell at the beginning of the nineteenth century, has been characterized by diversity. Three foundational principles of early the early Disciples’ identity—unity, freedom of biblical interpretation, and restoration—which seemed complementary to the early Disciples leaders, would lead to conflict and internal divisions throughout the next century, resulting in three different strains of the Stone-Campbell movement.⁷¹ One of these, The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was not

⁶⁹ Dyrness, *Poetic Theology*, 169.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 169-70.

⁷¹ Mark G. Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship: The Shaping of Contemporary Disciples Identity* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997), 8-9.

established as a formal denomination until 1968 when it also adopted a document titled *The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*.⁷²

Before delving into the beauty intrinsic to present-day Disciples, it is important to note that although the founders did not write of a theology of beauty, they had been influenced by the theology of beauty of the eighteenth-century American theologian Jonathan Edwards, who “...placed the language of beauty at the center of his theological project.”⁷³ Alexander Campbell believed that Edwards was the greatest theologian produced on American soil and steeped himself in Edwards’ writings while he was in Glasgow,⁷⁴ while Barton Stone had encountered Edwards through his roots with the New Light Presbyterians.⁷⁵ Edwards’ theology understood divine beauty to be relational, particularly within the Trinity but also communicated to the creature.⁷⁶ The founders emphasis on unity is the clearest example of Edwards’ influence in the early Stone-Campbell movement and in the present-day Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). If we can begin to recognize and understand how beauty is intrinsic to our theology, we will, indeed, be recovering something that has been lost.

The “Preamble” to *The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* as it reads today does, I believe, show an intrinsic beauty of Disciples theology that generally goes unnoticed. The “Preamble” reads:

⁷² Peter Goodwin Heltzel, James O. Duke, Verity A. Jones, and William J. Nottingham, “Disciples Theology in the Twenty-first Century,” in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 21.

⁷³ Dyrness, 139.

⁷⁴ Eva J. Wrather, *Alexander Campbell: Adventurer in Freedom a Literary Biography*, vol. 1, ed. D. Duane Cummins, (Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press, 2005), 89-90.

⁷⁵ D. Newell Williams, *Barton Stone: A Spiritual Biography* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 105.

⁷⁶ Dyrness, 140.

As members of the Christian Church, we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world. In Christ's name and by his grace we accept our mission of witness and service to all people. We rejoice in God, maker of heaven and earth, and in God's covenant of love that binds us to God and to one another. Through baptism into Christ we enter into newness of life and are made one with the whole people of God. In the communion of the Holy Spirit we are joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ. At the Table of the Lord we celebrate with thanksgiving the saving acts and presence of Christ. Within the universal church we receive the gift of ministry and the light of scripture. In the bonds of Christian faith we yield ourselves to God that we may serve the One whose kingdom has no end. Blessing, glory, and honor be to God forever. Amen.⁷⁷

There are six theological categories that seem to take precedence here: theology, Christology, God in Creation, the Church, Reconciliation, and Mission. I believe that, although not explicitly stated, we can identify an intrinsic beauty within each of these facets, beauty that has remained part of the forgotten soul of the Church. In this constructive effort, I will focus only on three of these: theology, Christology, and the Church. By drawing out and reflecting on the beauty already present within these categories, we can begin the process of moving towards a restored vision of beauty and also greater wholeness of soul.

Disciples' theology, like the Disciples themselves, has been and is currently made up of a wide variety of experiences and beliefs. There has been some hesitancy throughout Disciples history for identifying a Disciples 'theology.' Mostly, this is due to the founders' opposition to the theology as it was construed by many of their contemporary Christian sects and denominations as 'dogma.' The Disciples founders condemned this kind of theology "...as static and dead, as something imposed by authorities instead of being generated by a living faith."⁷⁸ Instead, "...they thought through the implication of their faith, and they sought to provide a vital

⁷⁷ "Preamble," *The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, Accessed March 10, 2014, <http://www.disciples.org/>.

⁷⁸ Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship*, 3.

and rational witness that would speak powerfully to their times.”⁷⁹ Two key sources of theology were especially influential for this theological witness, Scripture and Tradition, and, of the two, scripture was given much more privilege than tradition.⁸⁰ But, within the act of witnessing itself, we find another important source of theology for Disciples—experience.

A key attribute of the Disciples’ understanding of scripture is that individuals are encouraged to engage with scripture and interpret it meaningfully using their own reasoning and logic. This understanding was greatly shaped by the cultural context of the early Disciples that emphasized the rights of the individual conscience as opposed to a hierarchy that passed down ‘true’ knowledge or understanding.⁸¹ Therefore, within the Disciples movement, the only “creed” to which all ascribed was/is “Christ,” although even within this identification there is a tremendous amount of diversity. The Disciples founders understood the New Testament to be the basis for all things within the life of the church. Therefore, if we are to identify beauty within the theology of the Disciples, we must also identify beauty within this collection of gospels and letters.

In *Saving Paradise: Recovering Christianity’s Forgotten Love For This Earth*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker point to Paul’s use of the Greek word *doxa* in the New Testament as a reference to beauty. Paul understood beauty not as “...simply an object to perceive and behold, but a shining presence of spirit in all things that called for presence in

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ William Tabbernee, “Theology and Tradition,” in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 45.

⁸¹ Toulouse, 38.

response.”⁸² The ‘splendor,’ ‘glory,’ or ‘shining presence’ of *doxa* exhibited the ethical power beauty had to draw Paul and the disciples towards God and Christ. John 1:14 then—And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory—presents the assertion that we have seen Christ’s beauty, his *doxa*, and we have been moved to share it with the world. We can clearly see ties here with Barth and Balthasar who also understood the glory of God to be beautiful and something more than just fact or power. And, as we have seen in Farley and Dyrness, it is more than just the beauty of God that manifests itself through the Incarnation and the beauty of Jesus. Beauty is also intrinsically involved in the living out of the faith derived from scripture.

If God’s beauty is disclosed in the very nature of the Bible—the *doxa* described by Paul or Barth or von Balthasar—the Disciples’ reliance upon scripture would be absolutely shaped by this beauty. Beauty is found in the gift of receiving the ‘light of scripture’ and also in the responding to it. For the Disciples, scripture itself would meet all of Scarry’s criteria for beauty, as they understood it to be divinely inspired yet written by human beings shaped by their individual contexts and experiences.⁸³ The Bible evokes the responses of beauty and forms the very basis for their witnessing. In reading and interpreting biblical text, the response is replication and begetting which leads to the desire to share the meaning understood there and also to share the beauty within the Bible with others. Wrapped up in this process is the deliberation that aspires to understand the ultimate truth offered within scripture. The emphasis on scripture within the Disciples movement that leads to an attempt to faithfully live out the

⁸² Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: Recovering Christianity’s Forgotten Love For This Earth* (London: Canterbury Press, 2012), 150.

⁸³ Toulouse, 41.

witness of Jesus Christ evidences that scripture itself, for the Disciples, is beautiful. Now let us see if the same is true of Disciples Tradition.

Tradition, as understood by the original founders, was not considered to be of primary importance. Common phrases within the Disciples movement, such as ‘No creed but Christ’ and ‘Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent,’ show what the founders’ suspicion of Tradition entailed. However, as can be seen with the “Preamble,” Tradition (or, perhaps for Disciples, ‘tradition’) has played an important role within the movement, particularly through two themes—restoration and unity—which seem to be inseparable from Disciples understanding of our own identity. However, the contemporary idea of these two themes is somewhat different than what the Disciples founders envisioned.

In the words of Thomas Campbell, restoration was about restoring the Church to the “...original standard of Christianity, the profession and practice of the primitive Church, as expressly exhibited upon the sacred page of New Testament scripture...”⁸⁴ Disciples, he writes, seek to “restore unity, peace, and purity, to the whole church of God.”⁸⁵ Now, the restoration theme is better understood as apostolicity, or the “...faithfulness to the apostolic message of God’s gospel in Jesus Christ.”⁸⁶ Recognizing that this apostolic message came from many diverse communities of faith within the early Church and was being interpreted by more diverse communities in the present Church, unity has always been an important theme for Disciples tradition as well. I mentioned above that the Disciples resisted structuring as a denomination until the mid-twentieth century. This shows how committed to an idea of unity the first

⁸⁴ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address* (Pittsburgh: Record Publishing Company, Centennial Edition, 1909), 77.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 3.

⁸⁶ Heltzel, Duke, Jones, Nottingham, “Disciples Theology,” 24.

generations of Disciples were. Now, Disciples still hold unity to be an essential part of their identity but part of the ‘universal church’ that is united in the ‘One whose kingdom has no end.’ In living out these two themes we can see that the Disciples also have a commitment to Experience as part of their identity.

Without the interaction with God and human life, Disciples tradition could very well become the static and dogmatic Tradition from which the Disciples founders wanted to move away. In order to remain vibrant, theology must evolve from the “...continuing human experience of what it means to affirm God is at work in our world: in our history, in our present, and in our future.”⁸⁷ From the Disciples emphasis on accepting of the ‘mission of witness and service to all people’ as well as commitments to baptism, ministry, and the Lord’s Supper within the “Preamble” we can see that Experience has a strong foothold within Disciples theology. In all of these things, there is a reference vastly beyond the individual experiences themselves. Each one makes claims about God and about the relationship of all things with and in God. These claims are not unambiguous, whole, or entirely pure moments of holiness, but they can “...disrupt what we have taken for granted about ourselves, others and God...cause us to realign our affections, values, and ideas...[and] compel and shape our conviction of the fullness of justice, mercy, and truth that we name God.”⁸⁸

As we can see through the theological themes of scripture, tradition, and experience, Disciples theology and faith and practice are centered on Jesus Christ. But there is more to it than this. From the first sentence of the “Preamble,” where Disciples confess that Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God, and the Lord and Savior of the world, we can see that Jesus becomes a

⁸⁷ Toulouse, 4.

⁸⁸ Kristine A. Culp, “What Do We Learn From Experience?,” in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 71.

lens through which Disciples view themselves and the rest of Creation. It is through an identity in Christ that Disciples endeavor to witness and serve others. It is through baptism and the Lord's Supper that Disciples find new life, enter into the community of the Body of Christ, and celebrate Christ's presence and redemption. This is the kind of modified participation that Dyrness was alluding to, a Protestant variation of Hart's understanding of participation. Disciples, by their entering into being with Christ, become beautiful and this beauty translates in every facet of Disciples theology and practice.

The Church itself is beautiful in seeking to be the Body of Christ in the world. Just because most Disciples do not recognize the beauty present, this does not negate the fact that it is. Nor does it negate the beauty that is an intrinsic part of the Disciples when we live into our identity as members of the Body of Christ, when we are Church. This is our participation in the dramatic narrative of the gospel that Dyrness points us towards. Our response to the beauty of God in and around us points us towards beauty in the living out of our 'mission of witness and service to all people' and as we are 'joined together in discipleship and in obedience to Christ.' Let us now turn our focus to how the Disciples live into this identity, particularly in worship.

For the Disciples founders, the New Testament laid out everything that was necessary for the worship, discipline, and governing of the New Testament church.⁸⁹ As with their vision for the theology of the Disciples movement, there has been some conflict in regards to what this looks like, what constitutes this New Testament Church and all of its roles and services. The Disciples' endeavor to live out the apostolic faith led to the understanding of the nature of the church as "faithful worship, witness, and service in the world."⁹⁰ As we have already briefly mentioned Disciples witness and service in the world and how these are engaged in the beauty

⁸⁹ Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, 16.

⁹⁰ Toulouse, 67.

intrinsic to Disciples theology, I will focus on worship for the remainder of this chapter. In seeking to reflect on the beauty inherent within Disciples worship, I will follow what I would consider to be a typical order of worship for a Disciples congregation focusing on four specific elements: the worship space, the music, the spoken words of prayers and preaching, and the sacrament (or ordinance) of the Lord's Supper.

The first element of worship is the most noticeable, and some might argue that it is the most important statement that will be made throughout the entirety of a worship service. The architecture of the worship space and how it is set up for worship offer some significant insights into the faith and beliefs of a congregation. Most traditional Disciples congregation worship in a sanctuary where there is a division between the congregation and the minister(s) of the service. The congregation typically sits in pews or chairs that face a chancel area that probably has a communion table, pulpit, and possibly a lectern. Showcasing the Disciples commitment to celebrating the Lord's Supper each week, the communion table usually sits in a central location on the chancel or on the floor in front of the chancel. Also, there is usually a prominent cross either hung behind the communion table or a small tabletop cross, placed on top of the communion table demonstrating the central focus of worship on Jesus. These pieces are usually the bare minimum of what can be found in a Disciples worship space. Here, beauty is at its most aesthetic representation, whether these pieces are stark and simple or ornate and elaborate. From here, there is an endless list of materials and objects that might be used in 'decoration.'

Disciples' churches may have banners, fabric, stained glass windows, paintings and other art, candles, plants, and many other aesthetic elements that add beauty to the worship space. Despite this abundance of beauty, I would argue that most Disciples congregations do not fully incorporate the aesthetics of their worship space into the worshipping experience but I will return

to this argument in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to recognize that beauty is an intrinsic part of the design and decoration of worship spaces within Disciples congregations. "...Where there are arts," writes Farley, "beauty is not far behind."⁹¹

The next major element of worship that points to an intrinsic beauty within Disciples worship is the music that carries the congregation through the worship liturgy. In all of the Disciples congregations with which I have worshipped, the music has played an integral role in determining the feeling of worship. The hymns that are chosen for each worship service help determine an aesthetic feeling throughout the service, usually triumphant and majestic in the opening hymn that calls everyone into worship and soft and thoughtful before a time of prayer or meditation. Here we already see some connections with the earlier definitions of beauty in that music invokes something within the congregation and can point them towards something greater within worship. But sometimes beauty is also mentioned explicitly within these hymns.

The most currently used Disciples collection of hymns is the *Chalice Hymnal*, which was published in 1995. Within this collection of hymns, beauty is explicitly mentioned in thirty-two hymns and one prayer. Beauty is recognized in many different ways within these hymns, but the majority point to the beauty present in creation, the beauty of God, and the beauty that God gives to us. Creation is praised as beautiful in hymns such as "For the Beauty of the Earth," "All Things Bright and Beautiful," and "For Beauty of Meadows."⁹² The hymns "Colorful Creator"

⁹¹ Farley, 67.

⁹² The hymns that speak of the beauty of creation are: "For the Beauty of the Earth (#56)," "All Things Bright and Beautiful (#61)," "For Beauty of Meadows (#696)," "We Three Kings (#172)," "Mountain Brook with Rushing Waters (#689)," and "God of Ages, Whose Almighty Hand (#725)." *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995).

and “Dear Lord, and Father of Mankind” convey the beauty of God along⁹³ while hymns like “The God of Us All” and “O God of Vision” recognize beauty as something that God imparts to us.⁹⁴ There is also a line in “’Twas in the Moon of Wintertime” that speaks of the beauty of the Christ child.⁹⁵ Beauty is also mentioned in reference to heaven,⁹⁶ Christ’s work,⁹⁷ the names of God,⁹⁸ the Bible,⁹⁹ as something temporal,¹⁰⁰ and as a nation.¹⁰¹ Most surprising to me were two hymns about how we are made beautiful¹⁰² and four hymns about how we make, find, or sense beauty. With all of these explicit references to different kinds of beauty, we can recognize that beauty does in fact have a role within the Disciples theology and worship, but we can also see that there not a precise understanding of how beauty is encompassed or expressed within them. It

⁹³ *Chalice Hymnal*: “Joyful is the Dark (#333),” “Colorful Creator (#457),” “Dear Lord, and Father of Mankind (#594),” and “O Day of God, Draw Nigh (#700)” as well as the “Church Musician’s Prayer (#9).”

⁹⁴ *Chalice Hymnal*: “God, Who Touches Earth With Beauty (#514),” “O God of Every Shining Constellation (#55),” “Cantemos al Señor (#60),” “The God of Us All (#84),” and “O God of Vision (#288).”

⁹⁵ The line is “...a ragged robe of rabbit skin enwrapped his beauty round...” and is #166 in the *Chalice Hymnal*.

⁹⁶ *Chalice Hymnal*: “Shall We Gather At the River (#701),” “Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory (#705),” “Marching to Zion (707).”

⁹⁷ *Chalice Hymnal*: “Crown Him with Many Crowns (#234)” and “The Old Rugged Cross (#548).”

⁹⁸ *Chalice Hymnal*: “Bring Many Names (#10).”

⁹⁹ *Chalice Hymnal*: “Wonderful Words of Life (#323)” and “Your Words to Me Are Life and Health (#324).”

¹⁰⁰ *Chalice Hymnal*: “Give Thanks for Life (#649).”

¹⁰¹ *Chalice Hymnal*: “O Beautiful for Spacious Skies (#720)”

¹⁰² *Chalice Hymnal*: “Strong, Gentle Children (#511)” and “O God, We Bear the Imprint of Your Face (681).”

is important to note that the hymns we have mentioned go beyond only an aesthetic sense of beauty. These hymns are theologically crafted and shaped and they encourage a response beyond the simple reading of text and playing of melody. Peter Heltzel recognizes this when he notices:

Of all the art forms that may be employed in worship, singing is especially corporate. Indeed, it is the art form most suited to expressing the church's unity in the body of Christ. Different voices, different instruments, different parts are blended together to offer a single, living, and unified work of beauty.¹⁰³

The music sung in worship has a function that, beyond its aesthetic value, is beautiful. Music unites and reconciles us with one another and with God. Yet, in most Disciples' worship, the music is not the only thing that offers this kind of opportunity. The spoken words of the service, the prayers and the preaching, as well as the sacrament of the Lord's Supper offer opportunities for beauty as well. They offer glimpses of the true Body of Christ that can be glimpsed "...only during those moments when it points beyond itself to the sovereign God of redemption and creation."¹⁰⁴

As there is no Common Book of Prayer required for use in Disciples worship, it would be nearly impossible to survey the ways beauty is used within the prayers and sermons used in Disciples worship in a truly quantitative way. My experience is that most ministers and church leaders write their own prayers and sermons, using inspiration from a variety of sources and resources. One of these resources is the *Chalice Worship*, which offers examples of litanies and prayers for many different occasions within the life of Disciples worship. In its index, beauty is referenced thirty-five times in a variety of prayers and litanies. These references showcase a wide variety of indications about beauty, much like the references to beauty within the *Chalice*

¹⁰³ Peter Goodwin Heltzel, "Singing the Trinity" in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 94.

¹⁰⁴ Toulouse, *Joined in Discipleship*, 159.

Hymnal. I suspect that the same kind of references to beauty could be gleaned from a gathering of sermons used within Disciples worship. Yet, both prayer and preaching have an aesthetic aspect that is beautiful as well. As music has the ability to set the tone for worship, the crafted or spontaneous words of prayers and sermons can also indicate the mood and flow of worship. The renowned Disciples preacher Fred Craddock is known for his ability to use stories as a framework for sermons. This recognition of the beauty of form and structure harkens back to Plato and Augustine, but as a sermon there is more to it. Prayers and sermons, ideally, invoke the same kind of responses that Scarry recognizes in beauty. They also especially meet the criteria of Hart's third and fourth criteria for beauty, evoking desire and crossing boundaries. And, they also engage the congregation in the dramatic narrative in a way that makes them participants in it.

The celebration of the Lord's Supper also fulfills these criteria. Central to the Disciples identity, the Lord's Supper is characterized as an open meal in which Christ's continued presence is celebrated in the remembrance of his shared meal with his disciples. For Alexander Campbell, the Lord's Supper always begins with divine action. God's action in the Lord's Supper "inscribes the image of God" upon each Christian heart.¹⁰⁵ This resonates with Farley's understanding of beauty as a feature of the divine image. Writing a statement of faith expressing the identity and integrity of the Disciples, Mark Toulouse explains that:

For us, the Lord's supper emphasizes the divine action of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is God who acts and we receive. The Lord's supper dramatically demonstrates that God is acting in the midst of our gathered community of faith. Through the Holy Spirit, God acts in grace to convey the reality of divine forgiveness and acceptance to all human beings. Therefore, the Lord's supper participates in our proclamation that God forgives sinners. We believe the table calls us to respond to the grace of God and to act in ways consistent with our membership in the family of God. Therefore, the table

¹⁰⁵ Campbell, Alexander, *The Christian Baptist* (August 1, 1825): 175.

strengthens our moral resolve to address the needs of the world. The Lord's supper not only reconciles us with our neighbors, it calls to our mind our active unity with all Christians everywhere; it reminds us we are in covenant with God and with one another.¹⁰⁶

Here we can see how much beauty shapes the identity and theology of the Disciples. Particularly in the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we become participants in the dramatic narrative of the gospel. As we gather at the table, we are "reconciled in difference"¹⁰⁷ by the one who unites us all. This united Body of Christ, in seeking the beauty of God, is also a manifestation of the beauty of God. The dual processes of the soul, desiring and knowing, are fulfilled by the beauty of this experience. The Disciples are, intrinsically and inherently, beautiful in their theological intentions and through their practice of worship.

As we have seen in this chapter, beauty is defined and understood in many ways. By examining some of these definitions and criteria, particularly those that point us towards a theological understanding of beauty, we can begin to recognize that Disciples theology, worship, and identity are intrinsically beautiful. We can also see the many ways in which beauty is understood, explicitly and implicitly, within the theology and worship of the Disciples. Beauty is an essential piece of the soul of Disciples, and yet we have somehow missed this connection in an explicit and recognizable way. Is it possible for us to remember? Is it possible for us to recognize and understand this beauty in a more meaningful way? We will address these questions in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁶ Toulouse, 276.

¹⁰⁷ Heltzel, Duke, Jones, Nottingham, "Disciples Theology," 24.

IV. RECAPITULATION

Remembering Our Soul

Through the past two chapters, I have discussed reasons why the Church may have forgotten its soul and how the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has not recognized the theology of beauty that is intrinsically part of its call to be the Body of Christ in the world. Before moving forward, there is an important question that must be asked—is it possible for the Church to remember its soul and finally recognize and appreciate the beauty inherent to the living out of faith? It should not surprise the reader that my answer is an emphatic and resounding “Yes!” As I have stated before, it is my hope for this paper to be a call to remembrance for the Church I love so dearly and in this chapter I will begin identifying ways in which we can begin to become aware of the beauty of our faith, ways that we can begin moving forward. Before I begin, however, I think it is important to explore some possible cautions for re-integrating and incorporating aesthetics into the life of the Church.

As I mentioned previously, Barth was one who had a great hesitancy about incorporating beauty into theology as anything more than God’s glory. His primary fear was that religious aestheticism would become primary, that beauty would become the object to be sought rather than God’s glory.¹⁰⁸ It is this fear of idolatry that also helped to fuel the many iconoclastic movements that have resulted in the separation of beauty from theology and it is still a concern for the Church today, even in an argument supporting the use of beauty in theology. Dyrness points out:

The legitimate encounters with delight and beauty have in our time become so attractive that people are often willing to give up everything in their pursuit. The Romantic turn for many has led to various forms of narcissism and hedonism. Here we recognize a central problem with the Romantic focus on aesthetic

¹⁰⁸ Viladesau, 28.

contemplation. Because meaning and purpose can be given symbolic shape in works of art or ritual practices, it is possible not only to see these as ends worth pursuing, but also as final ends. They can not only be seen as goods; they can become idols. And even good things can control us. Pleasures that are a natural part of God's good creation can, over time, not simply season or enrich our lives – they can take possession of it.¹⁰⁹

Yet Dyrness warns "...what we cannot do, despite deviations we prefer, is to ignore the turn to style and aesthetics that is so prominent."¹¹⁰ Barth, also, recognizes that the danger of aestheticism is not any worse than any other 'ism' that might plague Christian communities and, in fact, that there is a danger in neglecting beauty because, "where this element is not appreciated--...what becomes of the evangelical content of the evangel?"¹¹¹ And, as we have seen from the definitions of beauty from Scarry and Hart, beauty in itself does not lead to idolatry, but to a truth and depth that cannot be objectified simply as an object of beauty. True theological beauty is not recognizable simply because it is beautiful, but because it reflects the beauty of the divine and the beauty of the community acting as the Body of Christ in the world.

Another critique of beauty that we have already encountered is that of Kant. He understood beauty to be a subjective reality that conveys more about the observer of beauty than the object of beauty. This seems to be another concern about idolatry, but even more so, it is a concern that beauty encourages individualization rather than community and sentimentality rather than concern with truth and goodness. In regards to the first, John Witvliet explains that the "...individualistic, privatistic orientation of Western culture..." puts the "communal

¹⁰⁹ Dyrness, 30.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 35-36.

¹¹¹ Viladesau, 29.

character of Christianity...under threat.”¹¹² He finds that “...there are constant temptations to reduce Christianity to a private experience that avoids any sustained contact with others.”¹¹³ However, Witvliet believes that the Arts offer “...the most potent anti-individualism medicine available: the aesthetic tools necessary to shape experiences of profound solidarity and interpersonal discipleship.”¹¹⁴ Beauty, I believe, has the same kind of power. In the same way that Paul recognized the *doxa* of God as the presence of the spirit that called for presence in response, beauty invites and invokes the desire for the fullest possible presence of the Body of Christ and the fullest possible expression of the glory of God. Just as community is a requirement for the well-being of the soul, as we saw earlier, fellowship is an essential characteristic of the beautiful because it is how we can participate in and respond to the beauty of God.

The other part of Kant’s critique of beauty is that it is possible for the sentiment of individual or a community of Christians to play a primary role as opposed to the encounter with God being primary. In my experience with worship committees who follow the notion of ‘that’s the way we’ve always done it,’ I have seen sentimentality at work. And, ultimately, this cheapens the experience of the beautiful in the same way that Jeremy Begbie recognizes that sentimental artworks “...avoid depicting evil honestly, generate a kind of emotional self-indulgence, and fan an aversion to costly action and engagement.”¹¹⁵ Stating, “...unequivocally what the beautiful is not,” Barbara Nicolosi writes: “It’s not cute. It’s not easy. It’s not banal. It’s

¹¹² John D. Witvliet, “The Worship: How Can Art Serve the Corporate Worship of the Church,” in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 49.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 60.

not silly. The beautiful is not sweet or nice. It's not facile. And it's not unthreatening."¹¹⁶ This is the kind of beauty that is needed in the Church and in theology.

With these cautions concerning beauty in the Church and in theology, it seems a key element that could help deter beauty from following any of these detrimental pathways is a knowledge of the rituals, traditions, and theology of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As I mentioned before, my own experience in the Arts while in college led me to recognize the significance of having knowledge about that in which one is participating. If Disciples knew how beauty was integrated throughout their faith lives and if they had an in-depth understanding of how beauty plays a role in the life of the Church, perhaps an aesthetic sensibility would begin to develop that would help prevent things like idolatry, individualism, and sentimentality. This would also continue the soul's dual process of desiring and knowing. But how does this aesthetic sensibility become embodied in the life of the Church? I will conclude this chapter with three brief case studies pointing to ways in which the soul of the Church is already being encouraged by helping Disciples congregations recognize and understand beauty in a deeply meaningful way. The first two case studies portray the importance of knowing why the rituals and beliefs of the Church are beautiful and have meaning. The third portrays an example of how desire plays a role in the beauty of the Church, especially the dramatic narrative of the gospel.

CASE STUDIES

A. Twice a year, "Church A" offers a special worship service that helps inform new members and visitors about the parts of worship and the reasons and significance behind them. This is an opportunity for those who are unfamiliar with worship in this particular context to ask questions and to become familiar with the choreography of worship. Worship attendees have the chance to

¹¹⁶ Barbara Nicolosi, "The Artist: What Exactly Is an Artist, and How Do We Shepherd Them?," in *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts*, ed. W. David O. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 109.

go ‘behind the scenes’ of worship and learn about the beliefs of the Church concerning the Lord’s Supper and baptism, the selection of hymns and prayers, and the ways in which the congregation participates in worship and in the beauty of the Body of Christ. “Church A” believes this special worship service helps visitors and new members feel more comfortable when they participate in regular worship and also that it helps to remind the whole congregation of “Church A” of how their theology informs worship. All of those who participate in this special service have a deeper understanding of their role in worship and this service invites thoughtful contemplation and conversation about future worship planning throughout the whole church.

This instructional worship service helps remind the congregation and the visitors who attend this service that they have a part to play within worship and within the dramatic narrative that is lived out in the different aspects of worship, such as the Lord’s Supper and the singing of hymns. By teaching these participants about how they participate in worship and what the intentions behind the different acts of worship are, these congregants are better able to prepare themselves for worship and also become more open to and aware of the community that surrounds them in worship. By teaching the ways in which worship is intended to be communal, it becomes more likely that worship will become communal rather than many different individual worship experiences occurring next to one another. And, by including teaching and the asking of questions within the format of a special worship service, the importance of these aspects of the life of the church is demonstrated and further conversations about worship and the life of the church are made possible and more probable. The worship and life of the Church becomes engrained and recognized within the lives and worshipping of the Church body.

B. “Church B” also finds it important to educate the congregation about their theology and once a month they invite worshippers to take a tour of the church building. The tour offers information about the architecture of the building as well as the stained glass windows in the sanctuary and other art installations throughout the building. Not only does this provide an opportunity for “Church B” to help guests and visitors learn about the many programs offered at the church as they pass by each program space, but it also allows an opportunity to talk about the history of the Disciples and the symbols and other theological representations that are important for this congregation’s understanding of themselves. One of the key features of this tour is the explanation of why the worship space has the communion table at its center. This provides “Church B” an opportunity to talk about the Disciples’ focus on the Lord’s Supper and the belief that all who come to the table are equals in and through Christ. “Church B” believes this tour helps inform visitors and new members about who the Church is and also gives the congregation a greater sense of their mission and call to share the Good News. Since these tours began, the congregation has shown a greater interest in using their space intentionally and faithfully. Many new programs dedicated to serving the community have been given space within the church building and the church members are excited that the building is being used for the ‘mission of witness and service’ to the community surrounding “Church B.”

By engaging members and visitors with this tour of the building, “Church B” is actually doing something even greater—they are telling the stories of the church and explaining how those stories are tied into The Story of the Church. This is another enlivening of the dramatic narrative, even though it is outside of the context of a worship service. The participants in the tour are engaged as they learn more and more about “Church B.” And with this greater knowing, desire can also be recognized here. Desire becomes woven into the fabric of the church as people

share their stories and become part of this church community. As Hart recognized, desire is the energy behind the sharing of stories here. Also, like the special worship service offered by “Church A,” this tour gives opportunity for the tour participants to learn about their role in worship and in church life. As is evidenced by “Church B,” the congregation seems to be experiencing revitalization around their use of space and the ways that they are able to respond to the needs of the church community and the larger community.

C. For the past forty years, “Church C” has marked the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Epiphany with a reenactment of an ancient celebratory festival called “Boar’s Head and Yule Log Festival.” This elaborate pageant, featuring a cast of over three hundred people from all generations, is a joint effort of “Church C,” the theatrical costume department of a nearby university, and the community that surrounds “Church C.” Those who come to see this spectacular telling of the birth of the Christ child are treated to visual, aural, and communal beauty as they experience and participate in this festival whose most climactic moment occurs at the moment when the Christ child is lifted up by his parents and the full cast of magi, angels, shepherds, and angels bow to the newborn king. It is a powerful kind of storytelling that places theological beauty at its forefront and reminds all those gathered at this festival that they, too, are part of the Christian story.

This elaborate festival of “Church C” engages the imagination, creativity, and desires of the audience. For first time audience members, the two-hour production unravels the mystery of what event is so important to bring all these different characters together in one place. The moment when the Christ child is revealed creates a feeling of euphoria. It is a moment that is sacred, unprecedented, and lifesaving. For seasoned audience members, the suspense and anticipation of that moment adds to the exhilaration of the rest of the performance and new

details are discovered with each experience. Both first time audience member and seasoned audience member leave the production with the desire to share that kind of communal awe and wonder again, and also to understand why that moment (and the whole production) was so significant and meaningful. The dramatic narrative is absolutely engaged by this production, and audience members—if they are not familiar with the story of Christ’s birth, life, and death—will leave wondering who exactly is this baby to whom the whole cast bowed and why is he so significant. But the audience members are not the only ones changed by this.

For “Church C” this annual festival has become part of their identity and part of their story. The congregation members who form most of the three-hundred-person cast take on the roles of these characters and participate in the dramatic narrative in a unique and powerful way. Other members participate in the choir, handbell choir, set, lighting, directing, and many other things that add to the beauty of this production. Through this production, “Church C” shares their witness with their own community and the communities that come to see the “Boar’s Head and Yule Log Festival.”

These three case studies show some possibilities for our way forward. While they are helpful at pointing to some ways of cultivating an aesthetic sensibility concerning worship, the church building, and significant moments in the liturgical season, they are only starting points. It is my hope that the Church will continue finding ways to recognize and appreciate the beauty that is an intrinsic part of our call to be Disciples and live out the Good News. And it is my prayer that the soul of the Church may be restored as it yearns for what is beautiful and good and yearns to understand what is beautiful and good.

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