

TO THE GLORY OF GOD, II: HERMAN PEARSON AND THE ROSE WINDOW

by Tom Cox

By the time the First Presbyterian Church of Pocatello came into being, the debates over the use of hymns, liturgy, decoration, and symbolism in the church — things that had seemed unacceptably papist to early Protestant reformers — were largely over. As Julius Melton observes in *Presbyterian Worship in America: Changing Patterns since 1787*, in the romantic intellectual climate of the last half of the nineteenth century, many Presbyterian leaders had found liturgical precedents in the early church and in Reformation era practices and had begun reintroducing them into services — although some still decried such practices as too Catholic. While Old School Presbyterians had clung to a rigid Calvinism, New School Presbyterians had been in the forefront of change. Henry Kendall, in charge of evangelical work for the New School prior to reunion, played a major role in the West, pushing for an evangelism that would have broad appeal. Hymns, liturgy, and church decoration — all properly adjusted to fit Reform theology — gradually re-entered the church. When S. E. Wishard and Hugh Rankin came for the Gospel Tent meetings that were First Presbyterian's genesis, they brought with them a pump organ and a body of religious music. As we have noted, Wishard himself had a beautiful singing voice. Musical presentations for the community were frequent thereafter, and music has remained a central part of worship at the First Presbyterian Church from Wishard's time onward. Similarly, early photographs of the little white church at the corner of Fifth and Lewis show that it sported beautiful stained glass windows. Just who produced those windows or what happened to them, no one seems to know, but there they are in the photographs proclaiming loud and clear that the stringent austerity of John Knox was a thing of the past.

But if Wishard's hymns and the windows of the little white chapel reveal an approach to worship of which Knox could hardly have approved, the new church, built in 1927, reveals it even more clearly. And nothing in that new church does so better than the rose window that graces the west wall, high above the sanctuary, in plain view of every worshiper. Initially, there was no rose window, just a wall. The Northern Star Club, a body of the church's business and professional women formed in the late 1920s with the encouragement of the Rev. Barnum, suggested and financed the window. It would take the group many years to finish paying for the project, but long before then the rose window had become a signature piece for First Presbyterian, destined to be featured during both the 75th and 100th anniversaries of the church.

Herman Pearson, who built that rose window, was a master craftsman, but little known beyond the bounds of Pocatello — and was not particularly famous even here, for he was a quiet, modest man. The son of Swedish immigrants, Pearson had gone to work at age fifteen for the Pittsburgh Paint and Glass Company in Omaha, Nebraska, where his father taught him the trade. By the time he moved to Pocatello around 1920, he had a wife and two sons and was a master craftsman. At first Pearson worked for the Glass and Paint Company and from 1922 on for Idaho Glass and Paint (later known as Bennett's). He was to remain with that firm for some 40 years. Gradually Pearson's work drew attention, and the glass department expanded to meet rising demand; at its height it employed six or more men (including Pearson's brother, Oscar). But Herman was always the acknowledged master; when he retired in 1960, the company closed the department: there was no one who could replace him.

Idaho Glass and Paint became a leading producer of art glass in the West, accepting commissions from places ranging from Portland to Omaha. Pearson never signed his works, but experts acknowledge that literally thousands bear the stamp of his distinctive workmanship. As one authority put it, his work “was so careful . . . so *neat*.” Clyde Morris and Ralph Moon, who worked with Pearson for many years, later recounted Pearson’s absolute precision with wonder; he would measure spaces by eye, and the sections always joined correctly. Even after he lost the sight of one eye when a splinter flew off a piece of glass he was grinding, embedding itself in the eye, Pearson’s accuracy remained unimpaired. He was a fine judge of color too; he insisted upon buying his glass from a Kokomo, Indiana, firm, the only one whose quality met his standards; reputedly it was the same company that supplied the glass to Tiffany.

While working for Idaho Glass and Paint, Pearson crafted the rose window of First Presbyterian’s new church, yet that window was never alone. During the 1930s and 1940s he did the memorial stained glass windows on either side of the sanctuary. He did store fronts and other commissions too, the more difficult the better. But churches were his special love. Among those in the Pocatello area are the large “Christ in Gethsemane” dominating the fenestration of the Central Christian Church across the park from the Presbyterian church and windows in the Greek Orthodox Church, St. Anthony’s Catholic Church, and the Episcopal Church in American Falls. Others can be found in Idaho Falls, St. Anthony, Ashton, Rigby, Hailey, and Twin Falls.

Pearson’s work was quite traditional — First Presbyterian’s rose window features the symbolic eight sections, representing God’s act of salvation, rather than the easier six sections that were becoming popular during his lifetime. This traditional approach was appropriate, for to Herman Pearson his ecclesiastical works were more than employment and never objects for mere artistic experimentation, they were a form of worship. His sons told of visiting Forest Lawn in Los Angeles with their father. They wandered ahead while the elder Pearson lingered by the cemetery’s spectacular stained glass depiction of the Last Supper. When they went back to rejoin him, they found their father in tears.

Pearson was a long-time member of the First Presbyterian Church (as was his brother Oscar). A fine pianist, he sang in the choir and was its director in the early thirties; he served the church in other ways as well, most notably as an elder and as a member of the finance committee that in the 1920s directed the campaign to raise funds for a new church building — the building that was to feature his marvelous rose window. However, there were insufficient funds to complete the chancel when the church was built. When that work was finally done in 1973, choir benches, reredos, and a dorsal faced with a large Celtic cross were added; a pipe organ followed in 1978, and a second rank of pipes in 1998. Joined with the ascending arch of the building itself, these additions framed the window, helping to show it off as a good picture frame should.

The tools Pearson used in creating First Presbyterian’s rose window are “preserved and encased,” in the Frost Room, “as a tribute to his artistic ability.” These tools and the explanation that accompanies them gives one a sense of what went into crafting the window, but they pale in comparison to the effect of simply entering the sanctuary on a sunny afternoon and seeing Pearson’s masterpiece glowing with life. *Idaho State Journal* correspondent Sandra Pulling likened it to “frozen music,” but it is less static than the image her phrase conjures up. Perhaps

no one knows the window better than current church organist Gerald Hughes, who sits beneath it practicing for several hours every week. “As the light changes in the sanctuary,” Hughes observes, “the Rose Window changes. Sometimes the light brings out the deeper hues; other times . . . it brings out the warmer colors” — and, as he put it on another occasion, “when the sun shines directly on the window, it is like fire!” Music, perhaps, but hardly frozen.

The window is not iconographic, unlike the great rose windows in the cathedral at Chartres, which were intended for the enlightenment of medieval peasants. It is a carnival of color that suffuses the sanctuary and draws one toward the indescribable, all-powerful, majestic God that stands at the heart of the Reformed faith. Like Pearson at Forest Lawn, the viewer can be moved to tears.