

Screens In Worship: “Framing” The Conversation By Michael Bausch

Many worship communities are talking about projection screens and why to use them, how and when to use them, where to get them and in what size and material, whether it’s even a good idea to use them at all, and, why not to use them!

While all of these questions are important ones to any congregation thinking about screens in worship, another conversation lurks behind it all: what is this thing called a “screen”? What does it have to do with God, and the worship of God? Could it be that the church has always used “screens” but we just haven’t noticed?

Simply put, a projection screen is a framed surface upon which are projected colors, shapes, designs, pictures, and words.

The earliest surfaces used for expressing messages with color, shape, and picture were cave walls, where an available space was used by early artists to call attention to an essential event of daily life: the hunt. Early Christians used a similar surface, the walls of Roman-era catacombs, to portray essential events of their daily life: eucharist and prayer.

The surfaces of these walls provided small spaces that were dedicated to the content---and the meaning---of human life. Some early wall-art had no discernible frame, such as a free-formed picture of a bison, while later wall-art, such as Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling, was framed by a combination of the architectural features of the ceiling, and the lines of color the artist used to distinguish one panel of the frescoed mural from another.

Today’s church interiors employ a number of framed surfaces for communicating content and meaning: plain painted walls that sometimes include murals or pictures; colored-glass windows sometimes showing symbol, picture, and story; carved or painted wooden panels with story and symbol; stretched canvases painted with landscapes and human forms and framed as pictures; hanging fabrics with sewn or applied shapes, colors, symbols, and words.

Given this wide variety of framed panels already included in church interiors, the projection screen may be seen as another framed surface the church uses to display the content of religious faith through color, shape, pictures, and words.

A Surface For Story-Telling

For millennia, people have understood the story-telling power of figures fashioned from light and shadow. Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” dating back 2400 years, uses the analogy of a wall with shadows cast upon it by fire-light to suggest that a role of education is to help people understand the difference between what is real and what is a representation of reality. Philosophers and story-tellers alike came to see the educational and artistic possibilities brought by a light source, a surface, and the casting of shadows.

Walls and other surfaces would become the means, through light and shadow, by which skilled performers would bring delight—and moral lessons--- to audiences throughout the world. These artists tapped into the interplay of light and shadow, and found ways to use shadows themselves as story-telling devices for fun and learning.

For at least 2000 years, magicians and acting troupes traveled through China, India, Indonesia, Asia Minor, and Europe sharing the craft of shadow puppetry, bringing their audiences imaginative worlds full of entertaining stories and morality tales. First using walls and later, fabric screens, some of these performers understood the screen to be God's universe upon which they cast shadows of their hands and hand-made puppets as characters in a divine drama.

The English word “screen” finds its origin in this relationship of light and shadow. Hundreds of years old, the first uses of the word referred to upright panels covered with leather, cloth, or heavy paper and set in front of the hearth to form a room divider and shield people from the direct heat of the fire. It's easy to imagine children sitting in the space between the fire and the screen, making shadows on the screen with their hands and telling grand stories about these figures. These screens, like those of the shadow puppet theaters, became a place for playful imagination.

Techniques for intensifying and focusing lighting effects developed gradually over time. Early light projectors were constructed to shine light through painted glass and to show the pictures on room walls. One of the first light projectors was called a “magic lantern,” and it was used to delight small audiences with picture stories shown on walls, sheets, and special fabric or paper screens. Images were painted on glass in various colors and projected on the wall of a small room.

In 1646 the Jesuit priest Athanasius Kircher wrote a paper called “The Great Art of Light and Darkness” and gave instructions for building one of these light projectors. While he loved to “astonish” his viewers with this new visual art, he also encouraged them to understand that the images were not magically-produced but occurred naturally through the relationship of light source (a candle or sunlight), a mirror inside the projector, and the wall or screen upon which the colored pictures were shown. Eager to connect his projector and screen to his theology, Kircher is said to have actually traced rabbinical use of projected images back to Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem.

As photography and motion picture technologies advanced in the 19th and early 20th centuries, churches began to use technically impressive projectors and screens to raise awareness and develop support for important mission projects. In 1908 the Foreign Christian Missions Society used a screen and projector in the Central Christian Church of Indianapolis to show church delegates stereopticon slides and picture films of missionary work in Japan, China, India, and Africa.

With the continued advancement of early motion picture technology, a number of clergy and laity in the U.S. advocated using movies and screens in worship services. Thomas

Edison gave his blessing to these projects with an article he wrote for a church periodical in 1910.

During the course of the twentieth century, churches began to use other types of projection equipment in education and worship, including film strip projectors, 35 mm slide projectors, opaque projectors, and transparency projectors, and projected picture and color onto walls and screens developed for that purpose.

A Window To the Holy Imagination

A screen, then, can be any surface upon which or through which light, shadow, and color may be projected. The screen itself may be a wall; a piece of colored or translucent fabric stretched on a wooden frame or attached to adjacent walls by taut lines; an unrolled synthetic white or gray surface stood on a tripod; a specialized material suitable for video/data projectors raised and lowered from a narrow case by means of electric motor. The screen may consist of a reflective material upon which light is cast, similar to a typical film-strip or slide-projector screen, or it may be translucent material such as thin fabric or a synthetic material best-suited for video/data projectors. With translucent material the light projector may be in front of or behind the screen.

The screen becomes a window for seeing the world, as the whole world can be shown on and through this window. It becomes a panel for displaying God's universe through the relationship of light and word, as at the beginning of creation when God said, "Let there be light." The screen becomes an artistic canvas for church artists to develop their holy imagination to show the worshiping community the relationship of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit with all of creation.

The apostle Paul wrote about the relationship of light, darkness, and the Christian community when he wrote to the church at Corinth: "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6)

Light projected through and upon worship screens helps the community grow in their understanding of the content and meaning of Christian faith. The screen can become a means for the church to be in relationship with people who are eager to learn more and to grow in faith. Through engagement with the world and the positive influence of the creative arts to sensitize and grow awareness, people hear and respond to a calling to ministry in fresh and new ways.

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The Screen As Another Framed Surface On A Church Wall

Think of the screen as the wall, the page, the panels, the window, the mosaic, the painting, the fresco, the fabric art. It becomes any of the framed surfaces the church has used to show its story with pictures, symbols, and words:

- A catacomb wall
- A printed page of words
- An illuminated manuscript with word and picture
- A painted wood altar piece
- A stained glass window
- A mosaic
- A stretched and painted canvas
- A frescoed wall panel
- Fabric art
- A framed photograph
- A movie screen

A screen can show clear and large any of these classical art forms:

- A picture of praying figures from the catacombs
- A page from any Bible or illuminated manuscript
- The panels of a medieval wood altar piece
- A stained glass window from any church
- A mosaic from the apse of a basilica
- An oil painting of a bible story
- A frescoed wall panel from the time of renaissance
- A piece of fabric art
- Photography of important subjects

A worship team equipped with a computer, a projector, and a screen can create, store, retrieve, and present words, pictures, symbols, colors, shapes, and art forms that provide the content of Christian faith in new---and old---ways.

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