

Theology, Worship, and Revelation

by Michael Bausch

A theological rationale for the use of visuals in worship, including electronically-mediated visuals, is developed through a description of both the function of worship and the doctrine of revelation.

God is at the center of our worship practice. In worship, we gather in awe of God's love, justice, and creative power, and we offer thanksgiving, praise, and devoted gifts to God. In our worship we name our relationships with God, with each other, and with our selves. Paul Tillich wrote that

“Religion opens up the depth of man's [sic] spiritual life which is usually covered by the dust of our daily life and the noise of our secular work. It gives us the experience of the Holy, of something which is untouchable, awe-inspiring, an ultimate meaning, the source of ultimate courage.”

The imagery of our words and our visual images are in the service of this revealing of God's grace, God's love, and God's relationship to our lives. In 1 Corinthians 14:26, we find Paul's characterization of "orderly worship" to include "a revelation." The Greek *apokalupsis*, "to remove the covering veil," finds its way into the Latin *revelum*, "to turn back the veil," and into our English "reveal."

Tillich's discussion of revelation begins his Systematic Theology. "Revelation is the manifestation of what concerns us ultimately." This revelation needs "the word as a medium of revelation." Tillich is careful to define this "word." It is not to be narrowly defined as spoken, written, or heard words, but is to accommodate "...the religious symbolism...which uses seeing, feeling, and tasting as often as hearing in describing the experience of the divine presence...the divine 'Word' can be seen and tasted as well as heard."

This is important as we develop a case for the use of visuals, including electronically-mediated visuals, in the service of God's revelation in worship. Revelation is known through all of the human senses.

Theology disclosed and revealed through the senses is prominent in biblical narrative. The ancient Shema has served as a central affirmation of Israel's faith: "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deut. 6:4-5) Israel was not only to "hear," but they were to write those words on the doorposts of their homes, and recite and talk about them with their children. The Shema served as an ancient "audio-visual" where hearing and seeing were combined with disciplined reflection and discussion.

In Exodus 3, we find Moses leading his father-in-law's flock to pasture. Suddenly a

bush bursts into flame and he sees that it is not consumed. His full attention is captured. He says "I must turn aside and look at this great sight..." (Ex. 3:3) Then the voice of God calls to him from out of the bush, and Moses not only is engaged in seeing and hearing but he responds verbally, takes off his shoes, hides his face, and feels fear. He is fully attentive to God in that moment of revelation through his visual, aural, tactile, and emotional senses.

Our word "attention" comes from the Latin *tendere* meaning "to stretch." To give attention is to "stretch toward." To give our attention is a physical stretching process of engaging all of our senses. Like Moses at the bush, we need our senses engaged in order to turn aside, stretching to become closer to God's revelation in a historical moment. God's revelation to Moses in Exodus 3 occurs through the light of a burning bush and the sound of a voice. All of Moses' senses are engaged in the encounter. The prophet Isaiah provides another excellent example of theology disclosed and revealed through the senses. As an oral teacher, Isaiah uses sensory language and aphorisms because they maintain the listener's interest. Isaiah uses language that engages the senses and refers to that which is therefore familiar to the listeners.

Through 66 chapters, Isaiah employs references to the senses and the human sensory equipment:

- references to hearing and the ear are made 87 times
- references to speaking and saying are made 245 times
- the mouth is referred to 27 times
- references to seeing and the eye are made 95 times
- hands are referred to 76 times
- the feet, 19 times
- the tongue, 2 times (it's mentioned only 9 times in the entire Bible), and to the tongue licking, once
- the experience of travail, or labor at childbirth, 7 times
- the nose, four times

Isaiah uses sensory language to capture the fullest attention and response of his audience.

Similarly, we find sensory communication in specific stories from Jesus' life. For example, when Jesus gathered with the disciples in the upper room, they were eating together. Taste and smell were added to the visuals of the meal, the table, the gathered friends, the sounds of talking and eating, and the feelings of the moment. Paul gives us the first account of that night, how Jesus "...took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" (1 Cor. 11:23)

In speaking over the breaking of bread and the sharing of wine, Jesus engages the full

sensory attention of his disciples and offers the truth of the Psalmist, "taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalms 34:8)

The disciples saw the bread and the cup. They heard the words of Jesus. Their feelings and thoughts were engaged by his telling them to rethink the meaning of the bread and cup and to remember him from that moment on. The Sacrament of Communion was instituted using common, everyday material for divine purpose. These examples illustrate the importance of engaging more senses in our communication. Biblical narratives demonstrate how hearer and reader are invited into a new reality through language and symbol.

As Tillich asserts, this language is not limited to spoken or written words, but it includes symbol and image. God's Word is more than words. To consciously or unconsciously limit Word to word is to weaken our relationship with God. Tillich declares,

"...the Word of God often is understood--half-literally, half-symbolically--as a spoken word, and a 'theology of the Word' is presented which is a theology of the spoken word. This intellectualization of revelation runs counter to the sense of the Logos Christianity. If Jesus as the Christ is called the Logos, Logos points to a revelatory reality, not to revelatory words."

In the same way that visual arts have been identified with idolatry, so too can words, doctrines, and verbal constructions be idolatrous when they are elevated at the expense of the visual. This is what Tillich calls, "the Protestant pitfall." To suggest using visuals in worship is a way to balance the mediation of God's revelation to our human senses. Just as God's revelation is not confined to image, neither is it confined to word.

Introducing visuals in worship is a starting point for reclaiming the fullness of the Logos as "revelatory reality."

Reclaiming the Power of Image In Worship

A typical worship service is saturated with words: hymns, printed prayers and responses, sermon, lyric and anthem. These claim our fullest attention. Even as the eye sees architecture, movement, banners, bread, wine, and water, singers, and speakers, these visuals are deemphasized as words are emphasized. The ear has plenty provided for it but the eye never seems to get enough.

One Sunday morning I illustrated a sermon with a video clip from a trip to France. In it were scenes of members of our church relating with members of another congregation in Paris, with whom we have a sister relationship. As I turned on the television set in order to show the video, I looked out at the congregation and noticed all eyes turned and focused on that blue screen. In that instant I saw eyes hungry for visual feeding.

Harvey Cox has advocated the importance of the visual arts in general and film media in particular as expressions of "the theological import of the visual world." Recognizing the Protestant emphasis of "the Word at the expense of the Light" he suggests that "it may be time to redress the balance a little." Protestants have emphasized the creative power of word and deemphasized the creative power of image.

When we deemphasize visual imagery in our theological discourse, we miss that which precedes verbal construction: image. A word-oriented, book-oriented church misses the power of the image and its essential cultural and theological contribution. To understand imagery and symbolism as media for God's revelation is to legitimately explore the potential that electronic visual arts of film and video have for deepening our experience with God's revelatory power. These arguments suggest the importance of including within the life of the church, and specifically, within its worship life, visual arts, including electronic visual media.

The church's mission is to communicate the Gospel--to make disciples--in every generation. To do that the Gospel must be communicated using the available technologies of each generation. 21st century preachers have additional means for communicating power messages with the advent of electronic and digital communication systems.

Incorporating audio-visual media in worship engages our senses, encourages our attention, and deepens our response to God's work in our lives. Walter Brueggemann suggests this is critical to our work,

"...the task is to fund--to provide the pieces, materials, and resources out of which a new world can be imagined...people in fact change by the offer of new models, images, and pictures of how the pieces of life fit together--models, images, and pictures that characteristically have the particularity of narrative to carry them. Transformation is the slow, steady process of inviting each other into a counter story about God, world, neighbor, and self."

Film and video engage the eye, the ear, the heart, and the mind of the viewer. They transport us to different settings, and encourage us to make choices about how we live our lives in response to God.

Theology as Theophany

This discussion about reversing our bias towards word in favor of a fresh look at image leads to an examination of our theological language.

The very term we use to talk about our experience with God, "theology," reflects a bias towards "word," theos-logos = "God-words." Other words loaned from the Greek reflect our bias, too: we value logic (logos) over fancy (phanos).

The favored status of our word "theology" can trace its roots to Greek Stoic philosophy and early church tradition, which refer to a threefold way of speaking about gods in natural, civil, and ritual functions. It wasn't until Abelard in the 12th century that theologia was used to refer to "a philosophical treatment of the doctrines of the Christian religion..."

The term "theology" came to express our systematic thinking about God. With the development of the printing press, rational, linear, word-oriented contemplations found a medium for distribution, and the printed word became a means for the spread of the Protestant revolution in the 16th century. The revolution was fueled not only by a suspicion of the abuses of the Church, which visual arts and architecture represented to many, but also by a technology that allowed for mass distribution of words.

God's "Word" came to be mediated through words and logical constructions of such words. Theology came to be understood to mean "The study or science which treats of God, His nature and attributes, and His relations with man and the universe." Tillich concludes his theology of revelation with the striking declaration that all of the "different meanings of the term 'Word' are all united in one meaning, namely 'God manifest'..." While he doesn't use the Greek word, he is talking about Epiphany, which means "manifestation," or literally, "to show upon." Using biblical Greek to translate Tillich's phrase, "God manifest," we arrive at theos-phanos, or, "to show God."

The difference between theology ("the study or science" of God) and theophany ("a manifestation or appearance" of God) is the difference between transcendence and immanence---a study removes us one step from the experience, while a manifestation is direct experience. The very word "theology" is more transcendent, more removed from us, than the word "theophany," which is more immanent, more immediate. To propose using visual arts in worship is to reclaim the fully immanent revelatory power implied in the term "theophany," which is defined as "A manifestation or appearance of God or a god to man [sic]." Just as the church uses words to understand God's revelation, so does the church legitimately use pictures and imagery. Through the use of visual arts, and electronic visual media, the Word of God is mediated in fuller expression. Using visuals in worship is a way to rebalance our need for word, and our need for image, as mediators of God's revelation to humanity. Theology is theophany, theophany is theology. Word and light are joined to one another in an interactive dynamic. Biblical narrative weaves this theme throughout its stories.

The interplay of light and word begins in Genesis 1:3, "Then God said, 'Let there be light...'" Light is called into being by the creative word of God. Light emerges in relationship with God, with darkness, with heaven and earth. Similarly, the Gospel of John pairs word and light, "And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth." (John 1:14)

At the burning bush, Moses is engaged both by light (the fiery bush) and God's voice, the word. In the great stories of the exodus from Egypt are many dramatic examples of God acting through light and sound. At Sinai, there is lightning, thunder, the blast of a trumpet, and a voice. (Exod. 19:18-19)

At the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus, the voice of God is paired with light playing off of the figures of a dove at the baptism and of the prophets Moses and Elijah during the transfiguration.

The interplay of light and word is evident in Paul's conversion. On the way to Damascus, a bright light and a questioning voice encourage Saul's conversion: "Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice..." (Acts 9:3-4)

Later Paul writes, "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)

To bring together Word and Light in worship by using electronic visual resources, paired again as they have been since the dawn of creation and throughout important biblical stories, can effect a richer evangelism and teaching ministry.

Theology that includes multi-sensory phenomena opens a deeper and wider experience of God's revelatory Word, a Word that is known in word and images. Worship that engages spoken and written word and still and moving visual imagery assists in our honoring and glorifying God.

[Portions of this article appeared in *Church Worship* and in a 1997 Doctor of Ministry thesis, "Using Video Resources in the Worship Setting."]