Paul Berkbiger & Bruce Creed

Toward a Visual Rhetoric of the Gospel
“In the beginning was the Word, and the
Word was with God, and the Word was
God” (John 1:1).

When we read these words, we are reminded of the important role that language and communication play in our daily lives, as well as in our faith walk. We are made in the image of God, and God places a high importance on good communication. Therefore, it is appropriate to investigate the role of language and communication in worship because worship is one of the most important activities in which Christians engage. Increasingly, technology is becoming a feature of worship, and so there is also a need for a clearer understanding of the role of technology in worship. Primarily, technology has amplified the role of images and visual communication in the worship setting, and so this is a time when it could be helpful to many churches to describe some of the means by which worship can be enriched through technology.

Sermons given during the Easter season often remind us of the importance Christ placed on both telling and hearing the details of Jesus’ earthly ministry. When Christ reached Jerusalem for the Passover and rode into the city in triumph, He fully revealed His identity publicly and then told His disciples to go and tell what they had witnessed. It is when Christ no longer keeps His true nature a secret that we each receive our commission to go and tell others about Him. We are commanded to spread the Gospel and to do so by the most effective means, developing our voice after our Savior’s model. If we truly follow Christ’s call to communicate the Gospel, we will use any available means to spread the Word and tell others of Christ. Today, with options of integrating technology in worship increasing, many churches are caught up in asking about the role of technology, particularly in relation to communication.

Stripped to its barest meaning, technology simply means using the knowledge we have in a practical way to accomplish a particular task. This definition focuses on human ingenuity rather than on mechanical devices, though the means of technology can be as new as the latest computer development or as old fashioned as the mechanics of the human body. Technology is essentially the drive to use our minds in concert with any available tool to solve problems. That is to say, communication through technology is essential to our human nature.

If communication is important, and if technology is becoming a prominent feature of that communication, then we need to ask some questions. Can technology serve the visual arts in worship? What are the opportunities, challenges and obstacles to communicating the Gospel through technology? How important is the use of technology in worship for both younger and older generations?

An investigation of these questions may help to develop an understanding of the role of technology in worship as well as to help worship planners develop a vocabulary that will facilitate the introduction of technology into worship settings.

Can Technology Serve the Visual Arts in Worship?

Whether or not your church uses technology in worship, the visual aspects of a service are always important, and often are only discovered by worshipers when something makes them uncomfortable or somehow doesn’t feel right. The uncomfortable feeling some people may have in worship services that make use of technology and visual images may come when there is a lack of resonance between the image and what they are reading, singing or hearing in the service. Graphic design educator, historian and theoretician Phillip Meggs uses the term graphic resonance to define the harmonious use of image and word.

Dr. Bruce Creed is Professor of Communication, Concordia University, Nebraska, and Paul Berkbigler, M.F.A., is Assistant Professor of Art, Concordia University, Nebraska. Bruce.Creed@cune.edu Paul.Berkbigler@cune.edu
Meggs borrows the notion of resonance from music which means "a reverberation or echo, a subtle quality of tone or timber." Just as there is harmony in music, there should also be harmony among the words and images used in worship. Words and images should resonate in worship for the benefit of the worshipers.

Meggs explains that through technology "Communication is given an aesthetic dimension that transcends the dry conveyance of information, intensifies the message and enriches the experience of the audience." Communication is accomplished through two crucial building blocks: words and images. Each of these components enables the exchange of information between individuals, and each is an intimately familiar technology used daily in communication. Communication in worship is the same as communication in every other facet of life, though because of the importance we place on the text in worship, we may not always think of images when it comes to planning worship. Nonetheless, it is the consistent use of words and images that facilitates understanding.

Humans are predisposed to visual stimulation. It is little wonder that we reach for those things that can be seen in order to understand and represent the many unseen things that form the foundations of faith and belief. God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the Devil and his work; and the concept of salvation are outside of anything we can express in words. We seek to render what we know of these things in words, but it is often images that fully describe and quickly communicate these things.

John Berger explains that we are born into a world of image and language, but that we learn to see long before we learn to speak. "It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it [the world]." No less in faith, we need to be reminded that we are in the world but not of the world. There is often a lack of resonance between what we experience in the world and what we understand through faith. Worship provides the opportunity for Christians to see the world through the eyes of faith. Christ explained what our relationship to the world should be through His parables, and we seek to recreate that understanding through worship.

What are the Opportunities, Challenges and Obstacles to Communicating the Gospel through Technology?

Students of rhetoric and communication have studied and practiced the ancient principles of rhetoric developed in the classical writings of Aristotle and Cicero. Since the time of Augustine, Christians have sought to employ the most ethical possible use of these fundamental principles. The most basic of these principles is the canons of rhetoric. Early rhetorians strove to find the essence of rhetorical study and found consistency and strength in the five fundamental characteristics of rhetorical structure.

The rhetorical canons are: Invention (creativity or originality), arrangement (structure and logic), style (language), memory and delivery. These principles still guide students of rhetoric today, and they can also be applied in consideration of the ways in which Christians proclaim the Gospel in worship.

A brief definition of the canons of rhetoric may help this discussion.

Invention refers to the development and structure of the topic—whether it is original, creative and well-suited to the audience’s interests and attitudes.

Arrangement refers to the structure of the message. Logic and rules of structure focus on the development of good arguments.

Style and language are integral parts of a message. If the language is well-suited to the subject matter and to the audience, the speaker has employed a proper style.

Memory has always been prized as a significant speaking skill. The canon of memory refers not only to the speaker’s capacity for memory, but also for the audience’s memory. What does the speaker do to help the audience remember and process the message?

Delivery includes the study and consideration of the proper use of gestures and other nonverbal expressions, the proper use of the voice and the poise of the speaker.
These canons can be applied to the use of visual technology as well.

- **Invention**: Is the image arresting and appropriate to the development of the topic?
- **Arrangement**: Does the image provide additional structure to the communication goal? Does it sequence ideas properly? Is it appropriate for the subject and context? Does it make a sound argument that is consistent with the message being communicated?
- **Style**: Is the image suited to the audience’s ways of thinking? If it is new to them, does it come to them abruptly, or can they identify with it in some elemental way?
- **Memory**: Does the image evoke memories that are consistent with the message being communicated, or does it jar?
- **Delivery**: Has the image been delivered successfully by the technology?

Each canon facilitates an understanding of visual discourse or images as a significant and functional means by which we apprehend meaning in our everyday communication. Visual messages, when they are effective, are structured and composed as carefully as any written or spoken message and may quickly deliver a message to a particular audience. Applying the canons to the structure of a worship service in which technology is used to convey the Gospel means that the features of the images used should carry our thoughts toward the Gospel message and not divert our attention to other things. Technology, properly and carefully applied to worship, does exactly this—it focuses us on the features of worship and reminds us of the depth of meaning within the words and the images they conjure.

Words and images form the essential building blocks of communication, and we can look to the practice of graphic design for models of combining these elements. Graphic design is concerned with the arrangement of words and images in accomplishing communication and offers an understanding of written language that links it inextricably with images. Letters are, at heart, little more
than images of the audible sounds they cue and represent. Words, likewise, are the seen form of the sounds and ideas that they encapsulate, opening into understanding whenever they are seen and the mind "speaks" them in order to comprehend them again.

Written language likewise offers several forms for visual communication, best illustrated by Meggs when he outlines thirteen rhetorical forms within language that offer immediate models for image development:

1. **Simile**—providing comparison or parallel between two unlike things.
2. **Metaphor**—pointing out resemblance, but doing so by substituting one thing for another.
3. **Personification**—representing inanimate objects or abstractions by a human image.
4. **Anthropomorphism**—attributing human traits, thoughts, action and speech to animals or even inanimate objects.
5. **Metonymy**—using the name or image of one thing to stand in for another, related thing.
6. **Synecdoche**—using a part to represent the whole, or vice versa.
7. **Pun**—using the phenomena that one symbol can have two or more meanings, or that two or more symbols can have similar or identical images but different meanings. It is the use of words in a way that suggests different meanings or plays upon similar sounds or spellings.
8. **Parody**—imitating the style of some other work, often with humorous or satirical intent.
9. **Hyperbole**—exaggerating for the sake of emphasis.
10. **Litotes**—understating a negative concept as a way of expressing an affirmative, such as "He is not a bad photographer" to mean that he is a good photographer.
11. **Antithesis**—contrasting sharply two opposing ideas or thoughts to intensify their difference.
12. **Irony**—deliberately contrasting, presenting the opposite of what would be expected.
13. **Allegory**—representing an idea or topic symbolically.
Each of these rhetorical forms has, like the rhetorical canons, been thought of first in linguistic terms. However, the visual dimensions are easily discovered.

1. **Simile**—is there a comparison offered between the image and the word?
2. **Metaphor**—does the image substitute for the word (or vice versa)?
3. **Personification**—is there a way to represent an abstract idea in human form (for example, we are the body of Christ)?
4. **Anthropomorphism**—can abstract ideas be translated into animal or even inanimate forms (as in the Devil is a prowling lion)?
5. **Metonymy**—can one image stand for another (for example, a dove as the symbol of peace)?
6. **Synecdoche**—how does the image capture a part of the idea in such a way that allows the audience to supply the concept of the whole?
7. **Pun**—does the image provide more than one meaning?
8. **Parody**—how does the image seem at once familiar and unfamiliar? Can the image extend and develop the intent of the message?
9. **Hyperbole**—does the image exaggerate and emphasize in an appropriate manner?
10. **Litotes**—can the image take a perceived negative, and turn it on its head, positively?
11. **Antithesis**—does the image provide sharp contrast between two opposing ideas or thoughts to intensify their difference?
12. **Irony**—does the image provide a surprising contrast to the expectations established by the word?
13. ** Allegory**—how is the image symbolic of the concepts embodied in the word?

Discovering the visual dimensions of these rhetorical forms offers communicative precedence which can be carried into technological use.

**How Important Is the Use of Technology in Worship for Both Younger and Older Generations?**

Technology is already present in worship, simply because technology is ubiquitous in our lives. Some of us are more comfortable with this fact than others, perhaps because of the ways in which technology has developed over the years and subsequently been introduced to the different generations. There are those among us who remember the days when everything was written by hand rather than with a word processor. What for one generation is experienced as the state of the art is for the next generation experienced as the status quo.

The development and introduction of technology has not only made us aware of the different ways in which we process words, but it also has pointed out the myriad ways in which we now process images. Film and television celebrate disunion between idea and image often purely to shock us and to get our attention. This break in relation is rarely repaired for the sake of the information still to come; it is often either sidestepped or completely disregarded as the contents of the message are delivered. This technique is gradually being applied to all generations. For example, advertising that uses songs of the 1960s to sell any product regardless of its relation to songs of the Baby Boomers.

Even so, Boomers and other generations may not always be challenged by the notion that the contents of the Gospel and the contents of their lives are directly correlated. For Christ to have incorporated into His parables the simple image of drinking from a well shows us the relationship between our lives and His Gospel message. For many young people, however, even these parables sometimes do not resonate in their lives. There seems to be disunion between image and meaning because of the proliferation of uncorrelated images in advertising, film and other texts that they see daily. These young readers then interact with technology and media in which images have been used intentionally often without the expectation or realization that the images have been manipulated with purpose. Worship can bridge this gap between the careful and careless use of images by providing what we have earlier referred to as graphic resonance. The caution for users of technology in worship is to always remember that there is a need for resonance between images and words.

If the different ways in which we accept technology in our lives tell us that there is a generational technology gap, that gap can be
bridged in worship. Worship is a place where harmony and resonance are seemingly expected and where we are often uncomfortable with dissonance. Within the church, we are often text-centered, particularly because Scripture is the basis of our worship. We are sometimes so concerned with the words and terminology that we miss the rich messaging potential of the image. Our youth are intimately familiar and comfortable with reading images and gathering multiple meanings which can be shaped and guided by a more limited textual overlay. Roland Barthes observed: “Formerly, the image illustrated the text (and made it clearer): today, the text loads the image, burdening it with a culture, a moral and imagination.”

This is the state of the art becoming the status quo. One generation has been raised on text, whereas a new generation is being raised on images. Formerly textual production technology held preeminence; today image editing and creation technology is now more prevalent. Marshall McLuhan asserted that “The alphabet and print technology fostered and encouraged a fragmenting process, a process of specialism and of detachment. Electric technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement.” There is now a strong demand not only for proficient readers and writers, but also for literate and fluent image makers.

**Toward a Visual Rhetoric of the Gospel**

Worship is a communal space where careful communication is expected. Worship is a space of intergenerational contact. The generations are speaking in twin dialects—words and images. Given that communication is accomplished through these two building blocks, we have, in worship, the perfect lens through which we are able to examine the world and our place in it. Christ is that lens, and it is through worship that we develop our ability to see through Him.

Technology is compatible with this lens and can enhance our ability to see in the same way that a new pair of glasses allows us to see more clearly. Christ, the lens, is both word and Word. The word is the delivered word of God in the textual sense, while Word is God made tangible in Christ. Communicating the Gospel through technology entails the simultaneous delivery of both. Worship provides this communicative space and ultimately offers us Christ, the lens.

**Works Cited**

The Center for Liturgical Arts is an outreach program of the department of art at Concordia University, Nebraska. The center brings together students, faculty, and other church professionals to collaborate in the design and creation of art for the church. Many of our projects include temporary liturgical installations that facilitate worship and the teaching of God's Word. The center also works with architects and liturgical consultants in the design of worship space and the creation of ecclesiastical art.

Our Mission

The Center for Liturgical Art seeks to encourage and assist the church in its ministry through the visual arts.

We seek to accomplish this by

- Promoting the use of the visual arts in worship
- Providing educational outreach programs in the visual arts
- Providing development, design and production of visual art resources

The staff and faculty of the Center for Liturgical Art and Concordia’s department of art are available to churches and congregations for presentations, consultations and training seminars. We also accept commissions for liturgical art as we work with you to enhance the silent witness of the visual arts in worship and ministry.

For more information, please contact us.

Mark Anschutz, Acting Director of the Center for Liturgical Art
Mark.Anschutz@cune.edu • 402.643.7431

William Wolfram, Acting Department Chair of the Department of Art
William.Wolfram@cune.edu • 402.643.7499