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Visual Symbols as Aids to Worship

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Visual Symbols as Aids to Worship

Submitted to the Faculty of George Fox Evangelical Seminary in Candidacy for the
Degree of Doctor of Ministry

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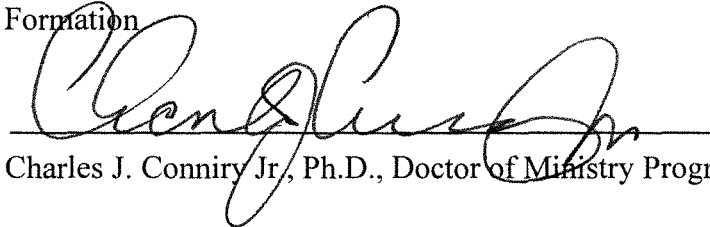
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Title: VISUAL SYMBOLS AS AIDS TO WORSHIP
Presented by: Susan Ostrom
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We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the Doctor of Ministry in Leadership and Spiritual Formation degree.



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ABSTRACT

The ministry problem addressed in this dissertation is how can visual symbols become aids to worship, particularly in small churches with limited budgets and traditional architecture?

Chapter One defines Christian Worship as the Body of Christ encountering and responding to God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and asks how visual symbols aid or hinder that encounter. A survey of leading authors on worship gives a basis from which to examine the place of visual symbols within the postmodern church.

Chapter Two looks at the roles of the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, and the Temple as visual symbols which were important in Hebrew Worship. The Second Commandment's cautions call for consideration of the nature of worship and of God.

Chapter Three examines the roles played by icons, the altar, and stained glass within Christian History. Chapter Four looks at a variety of ways in which visual symbols are aids to contemporary worship. These chapters demonstrate how such symbols have been important throughout the history of Christian worship. Concerns about idolatry and symbols as entertainment or decoration are also addressed.

Chapter Five develops an incarnational theology after having looked at the biblical roots of such a theology, revealing the essential connection between the material and the spiritual. It concludes that the ultimate place of the material is to articulate God's praise.

Chapter Six turns to the fields of education and learning theory to show that the use of the visual speaks especially powerfully to some people and so the use of visual symbols may be particularly useful to such people in their encounter of God.

Chapter Seven applies the conclusion that visual symbols can serve as aids to worship with two sermons using visual symbols, both of which do so in small churches with traditional architecture. A series of worship committee study sessions demonstrates the ways in which a deeper understanding of worship, idolatry, and incarnation can assist churches in deepening their appreciation of the roles of visual symbols in worship as means by which to encounter God.

Acknowledgement

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Story Problem

Ryan pulled the family van into the church parking lot. He climbed out and headed into the church. His wife, Meg, had pushed him out of the door after supper, saying: "If you aren't happy with the worship service, then go to that worship committee meeting and be a part of the solution. They are talking about trying some new things."

As Ryan walked into the stately 75 year old brick building, he remembered coming to worship the day before. As usual, he had really wanted to stay home and watch the baseball game on TV, but his twelve year old daughter Bailey had pled with him to come. He had sat with his family in the sanctuary without really seeing the room around him. The game would have been a lot more exciting.

The discussion had been going on in their family for months. "It's boring," Ryan complained. "I sit through church without feeling excited or joyous. I wish our church could be like the one the Jones go to. They say they never miss church; that it builds them up for the whole week."

Now Ryan walked into the worship committee meeting and sat down without feeling very hopeful. Seventy-five-year old Lois Kotter called the meeting to order and asked Pastor Sue to open with prayer. Then Lois pointed out the first item on the agenda. "First we need to thank the Davidsons for hanging the rainbow banner." Ryan could picture what she meant. The rainbow banner was a long, narrow banner made of different colored strips of cloth. Each Easter it was draped around the large wooden cross

that hung in front of the sanctuary. Beside it hung a smaller, rectangular banner which proclaimed “alleluia” in the same colors as those on the rainbow banner.

Lois continued, “And wasn’t the Gethsemane window beautiful yesterday?” Ryan had to think to remember what she meant. Then he realized she was referring to the large stained glass window at the side of the church. It showed Jesus kneeling in front of a rock. It had been a sunny day and the colors had been rich and full. Normally, Ryan gave little thought to banners and stained glass windows. They were just there.

“Now we come to the primary item on the agenda,” Lois said. We are here tonight to talk about ways we can deepen the meaning in our worship service and attract new, younger families. What ideas do people have?”

Ryan raised his hand. “Last summer our family went to my sister Carolyn’s church when we were on vacation. It was a newer church and they used PowerPoint during the service. My kids loved it, and I did too. Bailey said it was almost like having MTV in church.”

“Say more, Ryan,” said Lois. “I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“Well,” Ryan replied, “sometimes it was just a theme word that highlighted what the pastor was talking about in his sermon. Other times it was a picture that fit with the sermon, and during the songs there were pictures which went along with them. The whole service was exciting. It felt like a celebration.”

“I saw that once, too,” said Barb, a friend of Ryan and Meg, who also had elementary school aged children. “In some ways it was interesting, but in others I found it terribly distracting. The images didn’t always go that well with the sermon and the pastor was always fussing with the remote to bring the images up.”

“Yeah, I can see what you mean,” answered Ryan. “Meg said the same thing. She wasn’t sure it helped her to get that much out of the sermon, though it did hold Liz’s attention.” Those at the meeting smiled at the thought of Ryan’s very active six-year-old daughter. “Meg said instead of helping her to think about God, she was looking at pictures of mountains or reprints of famous paintings during the prayers. I guess she’s right. I got so busy looking at those things that I forgot about praying. But I wasn’t bored or thinking about the ball game either.”

Lisa, the choir director chimed in. “The few times I’ve attended contemporary services,” she said, “I’ve really liked some things, but also felt like I was being entertained instead of being drawn close to God. Whether it was PowerPoint, banners, or movie clips in the sermon, they didn’t seem to be oriented towards God.”

Fifty-year-old George, the head usher, snorted in derision. “The Bible says, ‘You shall not make graven images.’ You can’t see God. Banners, PowerPoint, even stained glass windows, why they are all idolatrous! And movie clips in church? We come to worship God, not to be entertained!”

Eighty-two-year old Paula spoke up: “I grew up going to a Catholic school. I remember studying the Ten Commandments in religion class. We read that about not worshipping graven images and I sat there and thought about our chapel services in the big cathedral where there were statues and paintings all over the place. I asked Father Timothy about it and he never did answer my question. That was seventy years ago, but I still wonder. George has a good point. We’re Christians who try to follow the Bible. Maybe we shouldn’t even have banners!”

Pastor Sue spoke for the first time. “I think we do well to take the second commandment seriously. At the same time, the Gospel of John says ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’ It seems to me that the Incarnation of Jesus changes the way we use material stuff, even in worship, maybe especially in worship.”

Ryan shook his head. He was having trouble following the discussion now. Sixty-five-year old Margaret raised her hand. “Let’s be practical. We have a primarily older congregation with folks on fixed incomes and a smattering of younger folks like Ryan and Barb’s families. We’re barely paying our bills now. Isn’t all that technology terribly expensive?”

“I’ve never checked into it,” Ryan said, “but I would guess you are right. As I think about it, the bigger problem is probably the basic architecture of the sanctuary. That stained glass window you love so much, Lois, puts an awful lot of light into that front area of the church. I remember the time we did the children’s Christmas pageant on slides. The night before, Meg had me up on a ladder covering that window with black plastic so we’d be able to see the pictures. It was a pain in the neck and even then it was hard to get a screen positioned so people could see it.”

“I remember that,” said Lois. “You’re right; we couldn’t see the pictures very well. Besides, all that plastic looked awful. I mean, it was okay for a one time thing, but we wouldn’t want to do that every week.”

“Plus, let’s remember that the central visual focus of our worship is the cross,” said Pastor Sue. “It bothers me a lot when I go into churches and can’t see a cross.” She went on to sum up their discussion. “It seems to me that we are dealing with several issues. The first is how to help people to encounter God in worship and whether visual

symbols, be they PowerPoint, banners, or stained glass windows, can help. Tied in with that are the theological questions about the worship of graven images versus how the Incarnation of Jesus has changed the way we can use the material. And then there are the challenges of how to do all that in a small church with traditional architecture. It's a lot easier if you are starting from the ground up and building a new structure. Doing it in an older building on a limited budget is more difficult."

Pastor Sue's summary points to a need facing the church. What is the place of the material in worship? Are visual symbols idolatrous, simply decoration or entertainment, or can they become aids to worship? Finally, how can small churches, on limited budgets and with traditional architecture, make the best use of visual symbols? The purpose of this dissertation is to explore these questions, specifically, "how can visual symbols become aids to worship?"

Definitions of Christian Worship and Visual Symbols

In order to address the question of how visual symbols can be used as aids to worship, we must first take a look at Christian worship itself. Certainly this question has been the topic of entire books. It is not our purpose here to survey every possible slant on worship, nor to explore the many worship traditions within Christianity over the two thousand years of its history. Our purpose is to get a basic sense of what worship is all about within Christian belief. Furthermore, our purpose here is to look at corporate worship, or what happens when believers gather together, not at private devotions, quiet times, or individual prayer sessions.

A good starting point is that worship is being aware that when the Body of Christ, the Church, gathers together, they are in God's presence. This corporate sense is no small matter. In Matthew 18:20 we read Jesus' words: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them" (NRSV). Elsewhere in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul refers to the church as the body of Christ, for example, I Corinthians 12:27: "Now you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it" (NRSV). It is that body which experiences the presence of Jesus when it gathers together.

Worship is an encounter with God made known to us through the living Christ. Thomas Long puts it quite simply, "In essence, worship is what happens when people become aware that they are in the presence of the Living God."¹ James White defines worship along much the same lines, "Called from the world, we come together, deliberately seeking to approach reality at its deepest level by encountering God in and through Jesus Christ and by responding to this awareness."² Gary Burge echoes these sentiments when he says, "Worship, I believe, is a *divine encounter* that touches many dimensions of my personhood. It is an encounter in which God's glory and word and grace are unveiled and we respond, in songs and prayers of celebration."³

In understanding worship as an encounter between humans and God, another basic understanding is that God is the One who invites and receives the worshipper into the worship experience. Sally Morgenthaler notes, "The doctrine of God's immanence --

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute, 2001), 18.

² James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, second printing (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1981), 21.

³ Gary M. Burge, "Liturgical Worship: Using Ritual to Inspire True Worship." *Experience God in Worship*, ed. Michael D. Warden (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2000), 59.

lies at the heart of why people come to church.”⁴ Worshipers need not somehow ascend to God, through their prayers, their offerings, or their moral lives. God is already present. In worship believers come into that Divine presence. The question is not whether we can get God to show up, but whether we will show up to meet with God who is waiting for us. As Long noted, the real challenge then is to help worshippers become aware of God’s presence.

Another definition of worship comes to us from Robert Webber, “Worship represents Jesus Christ through re-presentation. Worship tells and acts out the living, dying, and rising of Christ.”⁵ Indeed, the re-presentation of Jesus Christ may be one way in which worshippers become aware of God’s presence. As worship tells the story of Jesus and lifts up God’s saving acts in Jesus, God’s presence is known.

Marva Dawn lifts up another crucial aspect to worship. She observes that God is both the subject and the object of our worship.⁶ With Webber’s statement that worship is the re-presentation of the story of Jesus Christ, worship focuses on God. It is helpful here to say that worship is not primarily about human beings, neither their likes or dislikes nor their needs and wants. Worship is about God. It is what human beings offer to God in response to what God has already given to us. Morganthaler says, “Because God is both subject and object, Christian worship is about offerings or sacrifice. . . . The gifts of worship flow from God the subject and return to God as the object of our reverence.”⁷ This emphasizes for us that worship is not a passive activity nor a spectator sport, but

⁴ Sally Morganthaler, *Worship Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 24.

⁵ Robert E. Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 39.

⁶ See her extended discussion of this in *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmann’s Publishing Co., 1995) 76-82.

⁷ Morganthaler, p. 80.

something that calls for active participation on behalf of the worshipper. That participation involves both receiving from God the good news proclaimed in the story of Jesus which is re-presented in worship, and it involves offering to God our love and praise as a response to that same story.

Webber touches on this active participation in worship when he notes, “Worship is primarily prayer. Worship is a prayer of relationship in which the whole creation lauds and magnifies God, the Creator and Redeemer of the world.”⁸ The response of lauding God is an essential piece to worship. As Dawn says, “It is a misnomer to call services ‘worship’ if their purpose is to attract people rather than to adore God.”⁹

A basic definition of corporate worship then is that worship is the Body of Christ encountering and responding to God as revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.

As we move on to examine the ways in which visual symbols can aid the Body of Christ in encountering and responding to God, it is necessary to note that there are times when churches gather for what they call worship but they do not encounter or respond to the presence of God. George Barna presents some disturbing information about this. He reports, “Among adults who regularly attend church services, one half admit that they haven’t experienced God’s presence at any time during the past year.”¹⁰ Barna goes on to say, “For most Americans worship is to satisfy or please them, not to honor or please God.” Apparently, many Americans do not understand - or care - that God is the subject

⁸ Robert Webber, *Planning Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 36.

⁹ Dawn, 81.

¹⁰ George Barna, “Worship in the Third Millennium.” *Experience God in Worship*, ed. Michael D. Warden (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing 2000), 15.

and object of worship and instead think of themselves as the object, and all too often as the subject.

As we move on to consider the role that visual symbols can play as aids to worship, an important question to ask is do those symbols serve only to satisfy and please the worshipper, or do they assist the worshipping community in encountering God? Do visual symbols become the subject of worship or are they means by which we experience God as the subject? Such questions may appropriately be asked of any other aspect of worship, from music to preaching to any variety of liturgical acts. As Dawn puts it, “Do our music, sermon, worship place, and liturgy distance us from the sacred or draw us to it? . . . Our answers will reveal whether what we do and how we do it is idolatry or genuine worship.”¹¹ While these questions could be asked of other aspects to worship, it is the purpose of this dissertation to specifically examine the role of visual symbols in corporate worship.

Let us now briefly define what is meant by the phrase “visual symbols.” In discussing symbols, Maurice Farbridge refers to Alfred North Whitehead, saying “a simple but useful definition is Whitehead’s definition of a symbol as something presented to the senses or imagination which stands for something else.”¹² For our purposes, the sense addressed here is that of vision. Clearly, worship can and should address other senses, from hearing to smell to touch and even taste. We will leave it to others to address those senses. Our purpose is to examine the way in which things that can be seen with the eye can stand for something else and what part those visual things, or symbols,

¹¹ Dawn, 269, 270.

¹² Maurice H. Farbridge, *Studies in Biblical and Semitic Symbolism* (New York, NY: Ktav Publishing House, Inc. 1970), xii.

can play in aiding people to encounter and respond to God. In other words, how can visual symbols stand for God or some aspect of the encounter with God?

Literature Survey

In defining worship earlier, I referred to several of the leading voices on worship within the last twenty-five years or so. Let us now take a quick look at the ways in which several experts on worship have addressed the question of the role of visual symbols within worship. While there are many authors who have contributed to the subject of Christian worship, we will survey five who provide us a sampling of the various perspectives being voiced. Their thoughts will give us a basis from which to begin our examination of how visual symbols can be aids to worship in the postmodern church.

James White touches on the role of the visual within worship when he looks at the language of space as a part of worship. “It should not surprise us that a religion whose fundamental doctrine is the incarnation should take space seriously in its worship. Not only did Christ enter our time, but he also came to dwell among us, occupying a specific and definite place on earth in Judea.”¹³ As he addresses the language of space, White particularly talks about the relationship between architecture and worship. “Church architecture both reflects the way Christians worship and shapes worship – and not uncommonly, misshapes it.”¹⁴ Indeed, the relationship between church architecture and worship became the sole subject of a later book by White and co-author Susan J. White called *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship*.

¹³ White, 76.

¹⁴ White, 77.

Within this broader topic of architecture, White looks at the role of the visual arts, noting: “Space also provides the setting for another important component of Christian worship: the **visual arts**.”¹⁵ He points to two poles for visual arts: “Some traditions have avoided them altogether. . . . The other extreme is the use of such arts in a purely decorative way, simply to ornament space.”¹⁶ In identifying these two extremes, he observes the irony that the actions of those who avoided or even destroyed visual arts “were strong testimony to the power of visual images,” while visual symbols used simply as ornamentation “have little potency for contributing to worship and merely provide a visual Muzak.”¹⁷

In the later work, White and White identify the overall purpose of visual or liturgical art. “Essentially, liturgical art is art before which we say our prayers. Its chief function is to make visible the unseen presence of God, although the image can never be confused with that which it depicts.”¹⁸

With these words, White and White make an important contribution to our topic for they remind us of the overall function of visual symbols is helping to reveal or manifest the Divine. They also remind us of the twin dangers inherent in such symbols: idolatry and entertainment or casual decoration. By lifting up these dangers, they identify for us, within appropriate boundaries, the potential of visual symbols to be powerful means to a Divine encounter.

Robert Webber has written extensively on the subject of blended worship, or worship which combines the age old traditions of Christian worship with newer, more

¹⁵ White, 104.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ James F. White and Susan J. White, *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1988), 156.

contemporary approaches to worship. While much of this discussion has centered on the role of music within worship, Webber does touch on the subject of visual symbols. As White points to the Incarnation in his discussion of the language of space, so Webber points to it in regard to visual symbols:

The concept of the arts now, as in the days of the early church, is rooted in an understanding of the implication of the Incarnation . . . A theology of the Incarnation says that God, the immaterial one, became present in this created world in a material tangible way. What this means for the arts is that the divine chooses to become present through creation, through wood, stone, mortar, color, sound, shape, form, movement, and action.¹⁹

In addition to the implications of the Incarnation for visual symbols, Webber also brings out their role in communication: “The arts are the language of the intuition, a poetic, imaginative way of supporting and enhancing the text of worship, the Gospel.”²⁰ With this insight, Webber challenges worship planners to incorporate means of communication beyond that of the verbal and auditory to include the visual. In a piece written some six years after the above quotation, Webber applies this to the postmodern era: “The new postmodern shape of communication has shifted to a more symbolic form.”²¹ Webber illustrates this postmodern shape of communication by describing the worship of Maryland Community Church in Terre Haute, Indiana, saying that their pastor “understands the shift that has taken place in communication from the exclusive emphasis on the verbal to a recovery of the visual.”²² This recovery of the visual includes special emphasis on the Christian year made clear through the use of banners and the use of symbolism.

¹⁹ Webber, *Blended Worship*, 104.

²⁰ Ibid. 105.

²¹ Robert Webber, “Convergence Worship: A Blending of Traditions.” *Experience God in Worship*. ed. Michael D. Warren (Loveland, Co: Group Publishing, 2000), p. 41.

²² Ibid., 33.

Sally Morgenthaler, in her book, *Worship Evangelism*, takes a close look at the needs of a postmodern society for new approaches to Christianity while at the same time challenging the assumption that people can be brought to Christ by making Christianity seem easy. Like Webber, she balances the need to be culturally relevant with the riches of tradition. In reference to visual symbols within worship, she too points to a new way of communicating: “Most of the people we want to reach are used to communication of a different sort. They relate to life through the highly visual world of television and the tactile . . . It is no surprise that today’s spiritual seekers are wanting to experience God with something other than the left side of their brain!”²³ This visual way of experiencing the world suggests a need for increased use of the visual within worship.

Marva Dawn, in her book *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, makes much the same point that Morgenthaler makes, namely that the need to attract the unchurched to church should not water down worship, or dumb it down. Even as she argues for retaining God as the object and subject of worship, she also points to the importance of symbols: “The value of symbols in the worship space is that they hint at more than can be seen. A symbol of the Trinity on an altar cloth, for example, invites viewers to contemplate the mystery of the One God being in three persons.”²⁴ Here she hints at the potential for symbols to draw the worshipper into an encounter with God, who is indeed more than can be seen, which introduces the possibility of mystery. Dawn identifies, however, the necessity for education about the meaning of symbols in order for the mystery to take place: “What symbols denote, however, must be taught, and churches must find new ways to involve the uninitiated in the delight and mystery of their

²³ Morgenthaler, 134.

²⁴ Dawn, 270.

meaning.”²⁵ The church is thus presented with both the challenge and the opportunity to teach not only new converts but even long time Christians about the symbolism of the Christian faith. We dare not assume that just because people have been Christians all their lives that they are familiar with the meaning of even old symbols. Certainly those new to the faith also need to learn the meaning of those symbols and the ways in which such symbols can aid worship. As a part of that education, Dawn asks us to reflect on what those symbols communicate about the living out of the Christian faith: “We must always ask if what we do and see in worship reveals the truth about discipleship. Perhaps our crosses are too beautiful – we forget that they are meant to die on.”²⁶ The church must evaluate the symbols themselves and the ways in which they are used against the truths of the faith they are trying to communicate. It is the truth of the faith that is the important thing. The symbols are only a means to delve into that faith.

While White, Webber, Morgenthaler, and Dawn each allow for the use of visual symbols as aids to worship, each of them explores worship in the broadest sense. None of them spends more than a chapter at most and in several cases just a subsection of a chapter on the use of the visual in worship. In contrast, **Tex Sample** devotes an entire book to the subject of the use of electronic culture in worship. Here, Sample examines the use of one specific form of visual symbol: the electronic culture. Sample defines electronic culture as “one where at least three processes are characteristic of the ways people so acculturated engage the world today. These processes of imaging, of the percussive use of sound, and visualization are deeply encoded in the concrete lives of

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

electronic generations and contribute to the social construction of who people are.”²⁷

Given the electronic acculturation of people today, Sample insists on the necessity of using that electronic culture to aid in worship. Where some of the previously mentioned authors point to the Incarnation as justification for the use of visual in worship, Sample sees Incarnation as nearly demanding the use of the visual in the form of electronic culture. “When so-called ‘traditional’ churches are out of touch with the people who live around them, the problem is not that they are irrelevant, but that they are not Incarnational.”²⁸ In explaining himself, he says: “Incarnation does not mean that God joins the human story and becomes part of it. Rather Incarnation is disclosure that the world is part of God’s story. The task is not, then, how we can get God into the picture. It is rather how we understand our picture in terms of God’s greater picture.”²⁹ Sample’s contention is that worship needs to understand the electronic culture in terms of God’s story – but in order to do that we must bring the electronic culture into worship because “Worship is the celebration and dramatization of God’s story.”³⁰ In response to our question, how can visual symbols be aids to worship, I believe Tex Sample would ask “how can visual symbols, especially the electronic culture, not be aids to worship?”

With this brief overview of worship in general and a look at what some leading authorities on worship have to say about visual symbols, let us move on to explore the use of visual symbols in several specific ways. We will begin by looking at what the Bible has to say about the use of visual symbols in worship, in particular looking at the use of three visual symbols in Hebrew worship: the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant,

²⁷ Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World: Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 74.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

and the Temple. We will then examine historical information about the use of visual symbols in worship by exploring the use of icons within the Orthodox tradition, and within Western Christianity the place of the altar and the role played by stained glass windows. We will look at the use of visual symbols within contemporary Christianity, including seasonal symbols such as banners and paraments, static symbols such as crosses and stained glass, the use of the electronic culture, and other more occasional symbols such as object lessons. In a chapter examining theological issues around visual symbols in worship, we will look at the biblical roots of an incarnational theology. Then, we will look to the realms of education and neuro-physiology to see what research into learning theory has to say about visual learners and how this might impact our use of visual symbols as aids to worship. Finally, we will offer some practical applications, including some sample sermons using visual symbols. We will conclude by returning to the worship committee meeting which began our exploration of this topic and follow them as they study the subjects of worship, idolatry, and incarnation. Ultimately, we will show that, while visual symbols can be misused, such as when they become entertainment or decoration, or can become idolatrous, visual symbols can help to draw worshippers into the presence of God and so can be aids to worship.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL MATERIALS REGARDING AIDS TO WORSHIP

As we explore how visual symbols can be aids to worship, I want to begin by looking at what guidance the Bible offers us. This chapter will examine the use of three Old Testament symbols and their relevance to visual symbols as aids to corporate worship: the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, and the temple.¹ After looking at these symbols, I will move on to a brief overview of how the second commandment informs the use of visual symbols. This material will show that the Bible supports the use of visual symbols as aids to worship.

I have chosen to look at the tabernacle, the ark, and the temple because they seem to me to have played a formative role in the worship life of the Hebrew people. Richard Foster points to the tabernacle and the ark as central to the Israelites: “God orders human activity, intense activity, skilled activity – the building of the Tabernacle, and inside it, the Ark of the Covenant. Then, as if in divine cooperation with this human effort, God allows his glory to be ‘housed’ in the Tabernacle.”² Biblical scholars note the similarities between the tabernacle and the temple. Some even suggest that the stories of the construction of the tabernacle are actually based on the construction of the temple. For example, in reference to the building of the tabernacle, Ronald Clements comments: “It is certain, therefore, that the P source, . . . has drawn upon recollections of Solomon’s temple.”³ Given these connections between the tabernacle and the temple, I will also

¹ The secondary literature on tabernacle, ark, and temple is not extensive beyond that found in Biblical Commentaries.

² Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (New York, NT: HarperCollins, 1998), 248.

³ Ronald E. Clements, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary: Exodus* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 162.

look at the temple's role as a visual symbol for Israel. The second commandment will caution us in our understanding of visual symbols, and provide a balance to our thinking about how visual symbols can and should be used as aids to worship.

The Tabernacle

An attempt to understand the role of the tabernacle in the lives of the Hebrew people can be confusing, for the Pentateuch sometimes refers to the tent of meeting and sometimes to the tabernacle. The purpose here of our exploration of the tabernacle/tent of meeting is not to exegete the differences and similarities of the two terms, but to understand the way or ways in which they aided Israel in its knowledge and worship of Yahweh. I will primarily use the term tabernacle, but on occasion, particularly when citing other authors, the phrase tent of meeting may arise. The real questions before us are: Was it indeed a visual symbol that aided the Hebrew people in their worship? Did it help the Israelites encounter God? In order to answer these questions, let us look at the purpose or functions it served.

The purpose of the tabernacle is first expressed in Exodus 25:8: "And have them make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them" (NRSV). Ronald Clements sums it up by saying, "Thus it is to be a sanctuary for the presence of God, and this presence is realized by the cloud of God's glory which covers the Tabernacle when it is erected."⁴ J.P Hyatt comments, "Taken as a whole, the Tabernacle was intended by P to represent the tabernacling presence of Yahweh with Israel."⁵ God pitches his tent with the Israelites.

⁴ Clements, 161.

⁵ J. P. Hyatt, *New Century Bible Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmann's

This image of God pitching his tent among the people becomes a theme which appears elsewhere in the Bible. In Ezekiel 37:27, God says, “My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” The Hebrew word *mishkan* translated here as dwelling place, is elsewhere translated as tabernacle.⁶ Similarly, Zechariah 2:10b says, “I will come and dwell in your midst, says the Lord” (NRSV). Here the word “dwell” is *shakan*, meaning to reside or permanently stay.⁷ If we go clear into the New Testament, we read in John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.” The verb “lived” is *skenoo*, meaning “to tent or encamp.”⁸ Thus we see that the image of God pitching his tent, or tabernacling among us, arises from these first references to the tabernacle.

Later, Exodus 33:7 identifies the purpose of the tabernacle when it says: “And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp” (NRSV). Exodus 33:9 and 11 both specifically mention Moses as the one who entered the tabernacle and talked with the Lord. God’s presence is seen in the descent of the pillar of cloud. Clements notes in reference to these verses, “It is clear that the primary purpose of the tent was to serve as a shrine where oracles could be obtained.”⁹ Hyatt observes, “It was primarily a place where Yahweh ‘met’ Moses in the pillar of cloud, not a place of meeting or assembly for the Israelite people.”¹⁰

Publishing. Co., 1972). 262.

⁶ James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1890), 74 Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary.

⁷ Ibid. 116.

⁸ Strong's, *Greek Dictionary of the New Testament*. 65.

⁹ Clements, 213.

¹⁰ Hyatt, 314.

The first function of the tabernacle that is relevant to our topic, therefore, is that the tabernacle represents God's presence among the people. That it was visual is made apparent in the description of its creation. In Exodus 25:2, God instructs Moses to take an offering of precious metals, colored yarns, fine linen, tanned skins, oils, woods, spices and gems "from all those hearts prompt them." This was something made of material objects. It could be seen and touched. Yet this material thing symbolized a spiritual truth: God was present with the Israelites. God dwelt among them.

At the same time, we must observe a note of caution here. God moves with the people in the tent, but God cannot be confined to the tent. Clements notes: "In a remarkable way this presence is shown to rest on God's promise to Moses, and not on any image or representation of God himself. God's word, and not his visible image, provides the guarantee that he is with Israel."¹¹ The visible image in the form of the tent is a backup to the promise God made. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* puts it this way, "Although the tabernacle was God's dwelling, God *descended* on it to meet the assembly (Ex. 33:9). The tent merely symbolized a concept represented in Moses and the Prophets: God's presence is available to his people. The tabernacle communicated God's holiness, his oneness and his presence among his people."¹²

The visual symbol of the tent assisted the Israelites in encountering God, but God was not to be confused with the tent itself. I will address this further in the section on the second commandment, nevertheless, it is appropriate now to emphasize that the tent was at best a tool which aided the Israelites in knowing God's presence. Samuel Terrian observes: "The presence of Yahweh cannot be attached to space, lest the God of Israel be

¹¹ Clements, 214.

¹² Leland Ryken, James Wilhoit, Tremper Longman III ed. "Tabernacle," *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 838. Author of article not cited.

mistaken for the gods of the nations, who were more or less at the disposal of temple functionaries. Yahweh does not ‘sit’ in a temple; he ‘walks.’”¹³

Along with symbolizing God’s presence, the tabernacle helped the Israelites to communicate with God. Hyatt shows us, “the tent of meeting was a place to which ordinary Israelites went, apparently to consult an oracle which would give them the will of Yahweh for specific occasions.”¹⁴ As noted above, Moses was the one with whom God met most often. “Thus is carried on the ‘tent of meeting’ tradition that there is a special place at which Yahweh reveals his will by speaking face to face with Moses.”¹⁵ Furthermore, God’s will was made known when the pillar of cloud, which had descended on the tent, moved. When the cloud moved from the tent, then the people knew they were to move as well. “Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up” (Ex. 40:36-37, NRSV).

Once again, this visual symbol of the tabernacle helped the Israelites to communicate with God, whether they initiated the contact by seeking God at the tent, or whether God initiated the contact by moving the cloud from the tent. They did encounter God through the tabernacle, though God was never limited to or by the tabernacle.

The Ark of the Covenant

The ark of the covenant was kept within the tabernacle, and in many ways the roles played by the ark are very similar to those played by the tabernacle. The ark was

¹³ Samuel Terrien, “The Religion of Israel,” *The Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary on the Bible*, Ed. Charles M. Laymon (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1971), 1155.

¹⁴ Hyatt, 315.

¹⁵ Ibid. 262.

more than just a piece of furnishing within the tabernacle, however. How does the ark add something new to what we learned about the tabernacle as a visual symbol?

At its most basic level, the ark was a container: it held the two tablets of the Decalogue, and perhaps a jar of manna and Aaron's budding staff. No direct mention is made in the Pentateuch to the placing of these last two items in the ark. However, when God first rained down bread from heaven upon the Israelites, God commanded, "Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness" (Exodus 16:32, NRSV). This verse comes long before the construction of the ark and so nothing is said about where this omer of manna is to be kept. The Book of Hebrews, which was written centuries later, notes that in the ark, "there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant" (Hebrews 9:4).

As a container for the tablets (and by extension the manna and the rod) the ark was more than a time capsule for Israel. It held Israel's corporate memory of God's words to them and therefore both reminded and taught Israel about God's ways. Moshe Weinfeld explains:

The specific and exclusive function of the Ark, according to the Book of Deuteronomy, is to house the tablets of the covenant; . . . The holiest vessel of the Israelite cult performs, in the Deuteronomic view, nothing more than an educational function: it houses the tablets upon which the words of God are engraved, and at its side the book of the Torah is laid, from which one reads to the people so that they may learn to fear the Lord.¹⁶

In Deuteronomy, then, the ark is not so much a visual symbol as a teaching device. At the same time, one doubts that the people of Israel referred to the tablets as people today might check out a law on the Internet or go to the library to look up a

¹⁶ Moshe Weinfeld, *The Anchor Bible: Deuteronomy 1-11* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 39.

reference. In a primarily pre-literate society, the Israelites were unlikely to open up the ark to pull out the tablets on a regular basis. Thus it seems that the educational purpose of the tablets and therefore of the ark were more in their presence among the people. In that sense, they can be seen as a visual symbol.

The ark also served as a throne for God. In Numbers 10:35-36, we find what has been called the Song of the Ark. “The ‘song to the ark,’ a very ancient piece of poetry, reflects the view that the ark was a throne upon which the Lord, the Divine Warrior, was seated invisibly while waging holy war.”¹⁷ The ark is the visible sign of the invisible presence of God and so the ark gives substance to the leadership of God. Brueggemann notes, “The ark stands at the center of the old ideology of ‘holy war.’ It bespeaks the dangerous and crucial presence of Yahweh in Israel and Yahweh’s solidarity with Israel. The ark embodies what is unifying among the tribes and clans of Israel. The ark articulates and embodies for Old Israel the holy rule of Yahweh.”¹⁸

The Ark plays a role in showing God’s leadership not only in war but at other times as well. It was from the throne that God led the people in their travels. “During the wilderness wanderings, when the people of God were on the march, the tabernacle was packed away and the ark led the way, representing God’s leadership of the tribes as they made their way toward the land of promise.”¹⁹ Joshua 3 tells how as the wilderness years ended, the ark led them across the Jordan River and into the land of promise. This crossing is also significant because Moses had died and the people were now led by Joshua. The waters of the Jordan, in full flood stage, stopped when the priests bearing

¹⁷ Bruce M Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 180 OT.

¹⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 248.

¹⁹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 43.

the ark entered the water, reminiscent of the parting of the Red Sea. This gave credibility to Joshua's leadership. It was the Ark, however, which was the real leader because the ark symbolized for them the presence and the leadership of Yahweh. In its footnotes, the *Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV states, "*The ark of the covenant* is the sign of God's presence among the tribes."²⁰

As a visual symbol then, the ark still symbolizes God's presence among the people. In a way more striking than the Tabernacle, however, it depicts God's leadership of the Hebrew people. It leads them in war and in their travels. It aids in their worship by helping the people to encounter God who is present among them.

Both the story of the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3, and the Israelites' loss of and then subsequent retrieval of the ark from the Philistines in 1 Samuel 4-6 emphasize that God's presence and leadership are not to be taken lightly. As a holy object, the ark must be treated with reverence and respect. For example, the priests who carry the ark across the Jordan must sanctify themselves and the people were not to approach the ark within 2,000 cubits. Boling and Wright tell us, "As in other religions, holy objects have a power, somewhat akin to what the anthropologist calls 'mana' which can manifest direct action of the deity."²¹ In 1 Samuel, the ark does not guarantee success at war for the Israelites, but when the Philistines capture it they are struck with tumors. Brueggemann says, "As the Philistines found the ark dangerous, so the Israelites must take heed and not presume upon it or upon Yahweh. The Holiness of the ark and the restless glory of Yahweh permit none to draw too close, either Philistine or Israelite."²² This truth is

²⁰ *New Oxford Annotated*, 273 OT.

²¹ Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, *The Anchor Bible: Joshua* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), 163.

²² Brueggemann. 43.

echoed in 2 Samuel 6 when King David attempts to bring the ark to Jerusalem and Uzzah is struck dead after reaching out to steady the ark when the oxen shake it. Brueggemann notes, “The ark must not be presumed upon, taken for granted, or treated with familiarity. The holiness of God is indeed present in the ark, but that holiness is not readily available. . . . The ark is not merely a useful tool. Beyond its utilization, there is an awesome presence to which heed must be paid.”²³

This visual symbol of the ark, thus, tells us of both the power of the symbol and more of the holiness and power of the God whom it represents. The ark, therefore, conveys something of the nature of God. It is an aid to the Hebrew people’s worship of God for through the ark they both encounter God and learn more of who God is.

The Temple

In some ways the temple’s role parallels that of the roles played by the tabernacle and the ark of the covenant. In other ways it moves to new levels. Like the tabernacle and the ark, the temple was understood as a dwelling place for God. As the tabernacle had done before it, one of the primary purposes of the temple was to house the ark, “The inner sanctuary he prepared in the innermost part of the house, to set there the ark of the covenant of the Lord” (I Kings 5:19, NRSV). If the ark was a throne for God, then as the Psalms often say, the temple was God’s house.²⁴

Also like the tabernacle and the ark, the temple communicated God’s holiness. The ark was kept in the holy of holies, the innermost sanctum, entered only once a year by the high priest. Richard Nelson says, “This was no ordinary building, but a structure

²³ Ibid., 249.

²⁴ See Ps. 23:6, 84:4, 122:1, among others.

to house the ark (6:19). Nothing could be permitted to violate the integrity of its walls (6:6).”²⁵

While David had been the one to conceive of the temple, it was built by his son, Solomon. In his dedicatory prayer, Solomon raises a basic question brought out by the establishment of the temple: “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (I Kings 8:27, NRSV). Nelson observes: “The classic theological tension between the immanence and the transcendence of God is introduced by the parenthetical rhetorical question of verse 27. It is resolved in verses 29-30 in the same way as in the petitions to follow. Prayer is offered in/toward the temple, but the transcendent God hears in heaven.”²⁶ As we saw with the tabernacle, the temple is God’s dwelling place, yet God is not confined there. God is bigger than any earthly temple. In response to Solomon’s prayer, God says, “If you turn aside from following me. . . then I will cut Israel off from the land that I have given them; and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight” (I Kings 9:6a.7). Nelson says, “Important as it is to the Book of Kings, however, Solomon’s temple would be no absolute guarantee of God’s presence or favor.”²⁷ The temple is God’s house, but God does not have to stay there if God chooses otherwise.

Solomon’s prayer also introduces for us the temple as an archetype of heaven. God’s true resting place is in heaven and the temple is an earthly reminder of it. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* says, “The temple is an earthly archetype of the heavenly

²⁵ Richard D. Nelson. *Interpretation: First and Second Kings*. (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1987), 46.

²⁶ Ibid. 47.

²⁷ Ibid. 48.

reality.”²⁸ It is, therefore, a symbol which reminds and teaches about something greater than itself. In coming to the temple, the Israelites got a glimpse of what heaven was like. The presence of a visual symbol was helpful in understanding God. It showed them God’s holiness and glory. While God could not be caged into the temple, the temple represented God’s presence in their lives.

At the same time that the temple was an archetype of a heavenly reality, it also brought out the reality of God’s presence within creation. The seven days of creation are echoed in the seven years for the construction of the temple. Two bronze pillars stood in the vestibule (1 Kings 7:21). Norman Snaith says, “The most probable explanation is that they represented the two mountains which flanked the path to the mountain of the gods away to the north.”²⁹ Within the temple was a molten sea of bronze. Snaith continues, “The bronze sea was a representation of the primeval ocean of the Mesopotamian creation myth.”³⁰ Psalm 93 connects this God of creation with the temple. Speaking of this Psalm, Arthur Weiser says the psalmist, “transfers that holy sublimity of God to the place where his Word is proclaimed and his testimonies are heard by the believers, that is to the Temple, which is the visible pledge of the divine presence, and calls for holy awe.”³¹

Thus we see that the Temple was a place of communication about God. As God’s house, the temple said to the people, “God is here.” The temple could not contain God, however, and so it communicated God’s greatness and holiness. The pillars, the sea, and various other furnishings proclaimed God as creator.

²⁸ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 849.

²⁹ Norman H. Snaith, *Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 3. Ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952), 62.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

³¹ Arthur Weiser, *The Anchor Bible: The Psalms* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1962), 621.

Another important aspect to the temple was that it was a place where people communicated with God. They came to the temple to worship and as part of that worship they offered their sacrifices.

A thorough examination of sacrifice in the temple would be the subject of several books, so I am not going to go into temple sacrifice in depth. A few words are in order, however. With the construction of the temple, sacrifice was controlled. It was to happen only at the temple and nowhere else. Richard Nelson notes, "From this point on, every king of Israel or Judah will be judged on whether he permitted sacrifice anywhere else but in this temple. Apostasy and reform in temple worship will be a special interest of the narrator."³² By its control of worship, the temple attempted to keep the people focused on Yahweh and not on the pagan gods of the surrounding nations. Speaking of sacrifice, Jacob Milgrom says, "Sacrifices were not ends in themselves but were divinely ordained in order to wean Israel from idolatry."³³ Sacrifices communicated to God the people's faithfulness: "The quintessential sacrificial act, then, is the transference of property from the profane to the sacred realm, thus making a gift to the deity."³⁴

Milgrom summarizes sacrifices, "The help requested of God stems from two needs: (1) external aid, to secure fertility or victory, in other words, for blessing; and (2) internal aid, to ward off or forgive sin and impurity, that is for expiation."³⁵ This second type of aid communicated to the people God's faithfulness to them in forgiving their sins.

As the place where sacrifices were made then, the temple reinforced the people's loyalty to God. It reminded them that they belonged to God.

³² Nelson, 48.

³³ Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible: Leviticus 1-16* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1991), 440.

³⁴ Ibid., 441.

³⁵ Ibid.

The temple was also a place of prayer. In his dedicatory prayer, Solomon asks, “Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive” (1 Kings 8:30). Nelson summarizes, “Prayer is offered in/toward the temple, but the transcendent God hears in heaven.”³⁶

While one should not assume that all of the psalms were composed for use solely within the temple, many of them were written for cultic observations. “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the Lord!’” begins Psalm 122. Psalm 48 says “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God.” It then goes on to muse, “We ponder your steadfast love, O God, in the midst of your temple.” Again, a complete exploration of the connection between the psalms and the temple would be cause for a dissertation all on its own. For our purposes, let it suffice to note that prayer and the temple belonged together. At the temple, people communicated with God.

The detailed description of the building of the temple in 1 Kings 6 and 7 tells us that the temple was a place of physical beauty. Nelson says, “The purpose of these chapters is not to provide a blueprint from which the original temple of Solomon might be reconstructed but to overawe the reader with the grandeur and glory of the building.”³⁷ It was something that could be seen. It also represented something bigger than just any old building and in that sense it is fair to call it a symbol. Like the tabernacle and the ark, it communicated God’s presence and holiness. In addition, as the place of sacrifice and prayer, the temple communicated God’s faithfulness and attempted to call the people to faithfulness as well. The temple helped the Hebrew people to pray and it was the primary

³⁶ Nelson, 53.

³⁷ Ibid., 43.

place of worship. As a visual symbol, the temple was an aid to worship for it helped the people to encounter God.

The Second Commandment

While the Old Testament presents us with the use of the tent of meeting, the ark, and the temple as physical objects, and I would say, visual symbols, which played a significant role in Israel's worship of God, it also contains some striking prohibitions of visual symbols. The second commandment³⁸ insists "You shall not make for yourself a graven image," (Exodus 20:4, RSV). The Israelite's making of a golden calf evokes God's wrath (Exodus 32:10). The prophets ridicule those who worship with idols (Isaiah 42:17, Jeremiah. 10:3-9). As we reflect on the use of visual symbols as aids to worship, we must ask ourselves then: How does the second commandment inform our use of visual symbols as aids to worship?

The second commandment's prohibition of graven images or idols (depending on the translation) is connected to the first commandment's insistence, "you shall have no other gods before me." The ban against images was an essential part of the ban against worship of other gods. Ted Peters says, "The prohibition against worshipping with graven images is really an expansion of the injunction to have no gods other than the true God."³⁹ Other religions known to the Israelites, such as the Canaanites, worshipped with images. John Bright notes, "In sharp contrast to the pagan religions, in which the image of the God represented his visible presence, Yahwism was anionic."⁴⁰

³⁸ Or first, depending on how the commandments are numbered.

³⁹ Ted Peters, "Images, Icons, and The Visual Arts." *Dialog*, Volume. 25, Number 4, p. 255.

⁴⁰ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (3rd. ed.; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1981), 160.

The exclusion of images from Israel's worship marked them as different and kept them separate from the Canaanite religions. Edward Curtis proposes, "It seems probable that the prohibition of images – including images of Yahweh – played a major role in resisting the influence of Canaanite religion."⁴¹ Fr. J.N.M. Wijngaards looks at this commandment from the standpoint of the ban of verse 5, "You shall not bow down to them or serve them." He notes, "The phrase 'bowing to and serving', when employed in religious contexts occurs *twenty-two times*, and it always has other gods for its object."⁴²

In addition to the association of graven images with pagan gods, such images were also associated with control over the god. Clements points out, "No image of him is permitted because, according to the thinking of the ancient world, such images provided the worshipper with a fixed point of contact with the deity after whom they were named. Such fixed contact tempted the worshipper into assuming that he had some degree of control over God, and it is this assumption that is rejected by this prohibition."⁴³

J. P. Hyatt makes a similar observation, "Those who made images sought to control the gods for their own purposes, but Yahweh could not be used or manipulated by man."⁴⁴ Likewise, Fr. Pol Vonck explains, "God is not to be represented. Not because matter cannot represent the spiritual . . . but because the material image, the immovable statue could be used in the illusion of controlling God."⁴⁵

Taken in the context of the times in which it was first issued, as well as when the second commandment was cited by biblical authors, we do well to note the vulnerability

⁴¹ Edward M. Curtis, "The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images in the Old Testament." *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society*, September, 1985, 282.

⁴² Fr. J.N.M. Wijngaards, "'You shall not bow to them or serve them'" *The Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 18, Ap.-S, 1969, 185.

⁴³ Clements, 123.

⁴⁴ Hyatt. 211

⁴⁵ Pol Vonck, "Imaging the Unimagable: Biblical Rootage of Art." *African Ecclesiastical Review*, Vol. 27, Oct., 1985.

of the Israelites to the pagan religions that surrounded them. The prohibition of graven images protected them from contamination by those other religions.

Israel understood God differently from how other nations understood their gods. Bright says, “Yahweh differed from the pagan gods in his essential nature.”⁴⁶ The prohibition against images was connected to Israel’s theology. Curtis observes, “The prohibition of images focused on significant theological concepts that set Israel apart from those among whom she lived. Yahweh is sovereign; he is free to manifest himself when and how he chooses. Yahweh is sovereign; he is not subject to either human control or to the forces of magic.”⁴⁷

The God revealed in the Hebrew Bible was first known through a Word, as in Genesis 1:3 when God spoke over the waters of creation. Israel especially knew God through history. John Bright says, “Yahweh’s power was not, in fact, primarily associated with the repeatable events of nature, but with unrepeatable historical events.”⁴⁸ Curtis suggests, “God’s manifestation in history and word constitutes Gods own testimony to himself. Man must not attempt to add to that witness by making an image.”⁴⁹

The ban on images, thus, has more to do with the people’s understanding of and experience of who God was than on the images themselves. God simply cannot be represented through an image. Peters helps us to clarify the issue when he says, “The problem with images has to do with their relation to true worship.”⁵⁰ Curtis suggests,

⁴⁶ Bright, 161.

⁴⁷ Curtis, 285.

⁴⁸ Bright, 161.

⁴⁹ Curtis, 286.

⁵⁰ Peters, 256.

“Israel’s practice was determined by the covenant with Yahweh.”⁵¹ This takes us back to the earlier discussion about attempts to control God. Worship focused around covenant did not need images, because the point of worship was precisely not for humans to control God but for humans to deepen their relationship with God. If anything, worship was to enable God, if not to control then at least to guide, humans.

How then does the second commandment inform us as we consider visual symbols as aids to worship? It calls us both to a necessary consideration of the nature of God and of the nature of worship itself. Who are we worshipping? What is the purpose of worship? Can symbols, visual or otherwise, aid us in any way?

As we saw in Chapter One, worship is the Body of Christ encountering and responding to God as revealed in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The purpose of worship is to help us to encounter and respond to God. The God whom we encounter is the One revealed to us through Jesus Christ, and so the nature of God for us as Christians is made known to us through Christ. In Chapter Five we will consider the Incarnation of Jesus, which will tell us some things about the nature of the God whom we worship. In this chapter, we have explored the cautions of the second commandment regarding the use of visual symbols in worship and concluded that such warnings are tempered by the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. If visual symbols can help us to encounter the God whom we know through Christ, then the second commandment need not bar us from using them as aids to worship.

⁵¹ Curtis, 285.

Conclusion

We have looked at three visual symbols used in the Old Testament to aid the Israelites in their worship: the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, and the temple. We have shown that God not only permitted the use of visual symbols but even commanded their use. While the second commandment raises significant questions about the use of visual symbols, we have shown that this commandment calls us not so much to completely reject their use as to consider the nature of God and the ways in which images can help or hinder our worship of God. The use of objects such as the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, and the temple show that images, including visual images, can aid worshippers to encounter God and thus that these images can serve as aids to worship.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS REGARDING VISUAL SYMBOLS AS AIDS TO WORSHIP

We have explored some of what the Bible has to say regarding visual symbols as aids to worship; therefore, let us move on now to consider the ways in which visual symbols have played a role as worship aids in the history of Christian worship. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the history of visual symbols within worship in a generic sense, and then to look specifically at the use of icons within the Orthodox Church, and at the place of the altar and stained glass windows in Western Christianity. We will also address some of the questions which arose over the use of visual symbols, both about icons and stained glass. Ultimately we will show the ways in which visual symbols can help people to encounter God and therefore can be aids to corporate worship.

Visual Symbols in General

The Christian church has used visual symbols in a variety of ways throughout its history. Once the church began to erect buildings for its worship and later other ministries, architecture itself became a visual symbol of great importance for the expression of Christian faith. In Chapter One we noted that James White pointed out that the Incarnation calls Christians to take space seriously in their worship.¹ Space, be it that taken up by a cathedral or the small spot filled by an icon or statue, has helped Christians across the ages to convey Christ to those who saw what was in the space.

¹ White, *Introduction To Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1981), 76.

White notes that symbols have evolved over time, so that they develop with connections to the past and yet change with each passing era: “Part of the inherited vocabulary of the past takes the form of visual symbols. Every mass movement creates its own visual symbols. . . . But symbols are mortal. . . . Symbols are meant to be used because they reflect realities of compelling importance for the lives of those experiencing them.”²

J. O’Connell looks at the history of visual symbols within the Christian Church and notes, “Images were in use (e.g. in the catacombs) from the 2nd and 3rd centuries for adornment and instruction. They were quite general after the 4th century.”³

Thus visual symbols or images have been used in a variety of ways in worship. White says: “The prime function of liturgical art is to bring us awareness of the presence of the holy, to make visible that which cannot be seen by ordinary eyes.”⁴ O’Connell also points to the awareness of God’s presence: “In Christian iconography, therefore, what is important is not so much physical realism as liturgical reality, i.e., the character of holiness (*splendour vertatis et caritatis*) which makes the divine transcend the human.”⁵ In conveying God’s presence, visual symbols call the worshipper to an experience of the divine, indeed to worship.

On her web site, Perette Elizabeth Michelli connects the use of sacred art to classicism’s emphasis on beauty: “It was believed that the image of whatever the eyes saw would pass through the optic nerve and literally lodge in the soul, where it would

² Ibid., 106.

³ J. O’Connell, *Church Building and Furnishing: The Church’s Way. A Study in Liturgical Law* (London, UK: Burns & Oates, 1955), 93.

⁴ White, 104.

⁵ O’Connell, 103.

ennoble or demean you . . . It was . . . believed that beauty manifested God.”⁶ To encounter beauty, thus, is to encounter God.

O’Connell lifts up for us the development of the veneration of images starting in the fifth or sixth centuries, “The cross was the first image to receive (relative) veneration.”⁷ He goes on to discuss the development of such veneration of the cross, “At first Christians avoided the use of a cross or crucifix, because of its pagan associations as an instrument of torture of criminals. When it began to make its appearance it was in a symbolical or disguised form (the trident, anchor, monogram). After the conversion of Constantine and the finding of the true Cross in Jerusalem (326), it became a glorious emblem.”⁸

We will go into more detail about veneration in our discussion of icons. Suffice it here to say that from early on in the history of Christianity, visual symbols were an important part of worship. They served to make worshippers more aware of God’s presence and to help the worshipper to pray. Let us move on now to some specific examples of visual symbols and the roles they have played in worship.

Icons

Icons have been used extensively in Eastern Orthodoxy. Perhaps more than any other form of religious art, icons are visual symbols used as means for prayer. In this section, we will look at the history of icons and the ways in which they are windows into heaven, or visual symbols which are means to prayer, and therefore aids to worship.

⁶ Perette Elizabeth Michelli, *Art History With Michelli*.
<http://www.ariadnc.org/studio/michelli/sgdefault4.html>, accessed 9/16/03.

⁷ O’Connell, 93.

⁸ Ibid., 101.

The word icon comes from the Greek word for image. In Orthodox thought, just as humans were created in the image of God (Gen 1:26 NRSV), and as Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15 NRSV), so images are necessary to the practice of prayer. In a very real sense, Jesus of Nazareth was the first icon, for he was the image of God. In the Old Testament, various symbols and objects (the ark of the covenant, manna, etc.) were means through which God acted, and prefigured the grace which was later known in Jesus. Leonid Ouspensky, one of the most important iconographers of the twentieth century put it this way, “The realization of these prophetic symbols is accomplished in the New Testament by the two essential images: that of our Lord, God who became man, and that of the Most Holy Mother of God, the first human being to attain deification.”⁹ It should come as no surprise that the depictions of Jesus and of Mary are the favorite subjects for iconographers.

Orthodoxy is rooted and grounded in the Incarnation and sees that icons are very nearly mandated by the fact of the Word made flesh (John 1:14 NRSV). Because the invisible God came to us in a visible form, that is in Jesus, humans not only can, but must continue to use images to know and worship God.

According to Orthodox teaching, the first manufactured icon, though not made with human hands, was The Holy Face, made when King Abgar, a leper, appealed to Jesus to come and heal him. Jesus pressed his face into a linen cloth so that his image was imprinted in the cloth, and sent it to the King, who was healed. The cloth was preserved for many years. Records of this legend date back to the fifth century. Icons of the Holy Face, or face of Jesus, have been popular throughout Orthodoxy ever since. As

⁹ Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), 49.

the Holy Face cloth brought healing to King Abgar, so icons have worked miracles for the faithful.

Saint Luke is believed to have painted the first icon of the Virgin Mary.¹⁰ According to some sources, he painted three of them after Pentecost, with Mary's blessing.¹¹ According to Orthodox teaching because they were painted after Pentecost, these icons were inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that God continues to speak through icons. It is not that any icon (or other visual symbol) is necessarily inspired by the Holy Spirit from Pentecost on, but that such inspiration as may be derived from icons or other symbols comes from the Holy Spirit.

The history of the Christian Church throughout the first six centuries unfolds for us the growing use of imagery. As Christians began to build church buildings starting in the middle of the third century, they began also to use paintings, and adapted secular images for sacred purposes. With the Edict of Toleration in 313 A.D. and Constantine's conversion to Christianity, Christians could be more open about their faith. This made public depictions of their faith, including the fine arts, more possible. By 532 construction began on the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, known since as, in the words of John Baggley, "one of the most outstanding buildings in the history of Christendom."¹² The use of imagery grew in importance with such constructions.

Even as the use of imagery grew in popularity, its appropriateness was debated. The Quinisext Council of 692 addressed among other things not so much whether Christ could, but in what way Christ should be portrayed. In Canon 82, the Council ruled that

¹⁰ Both painting and writing are used to describe the creation of icons. The word used varies according to the author.

¹¹ Ouspensky, 60.

¹² John Baggley, *Doors of Perception: Icons and Their Spiritual Significance* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 16.

Christ could be painted only in human form, not through symbolic means. The issue arose over the portrayal of John the Baptist, or Forerunner, pointing to a lamb, and saying, "Look, here is the Lamb of God," (John 1:35, NRSV). The fact of the Incarnation, of God who took on human form, called for the depiction of Christ in that human form and not in any other way. Ouspensky says, "We understand this to be the elevation of the humility of God the Word, and we are led to remembering His life in the flesh, His passion, His saving death, and, thus, deliverance which took place for the world."¹³

Controversy also developed around the question of whether God could be portrayed in any way with physical means. Some among the faithful asked whether a physical depiction of God did not border on idolatry. According to Ouspensky, this controversy intensified during the reign of Leo III, a Byzantine Emperor. Arabs conquered Constantinople in 717. While Leo drove them back a year later, tensions continued between Christians, Jews and Muslims. Jews pointed to Old Testament strictures against graven images, and Muslims also forbade graven images. Leo III attempted to keep some sense of peace among the various religions. One way he did so was to destroy icons. Iconoclasts, or icon breakers, accused those who prayed with icons of idolatry. The controversy continued off and on until 843. After the death of Emperor Theophilus in January of 842, his widow, Theodora, became regent for their son Michael III, who was still a minor. Theodora was Orthodox and so a supporter of the use of icons. A council was held in Constantinople under Patriarch St. Methodius, which confirmed the veneration of icons. While icons continued to be debated, the Orthodox Church still celebrates the Triumph of Orthodoxy achieved at the Council.

¹³ Ouspensky, 92.

During the iconoclastic controversy, St. John of Damascus, a Palestinian monk in the 700s, wrote several apologies for icons, which spoke clearly to the theological justifications for their use. He addressed the accusation regarding graven images by pointing out that even in the Old Testament, God commanded the use of images in the construction of the Temple. Furthermore, Old Testament images foreshadow future events. St. John of Damascus argued, “For instance, the Ark of the Covenant is an image of the Holy Virgin and Theotokos, as are the rod of Aaron and the jar of manna.”¹⁴ St. John believed that the commandment against graven images applied only to those who were susceptible to idolatry, and was not a generic principle.

In addition, St. John of Damascus pointed to the Incarnation as the decisive factor for icons. Because in Jesus God became visible, and took on human flesh, a material substance, Christians can and should now worship through the material. No icon can be painted of the Godhead apart from the Incarnate Word, for God is Spirit. The Incarnate Word, however, became visible, and therefore must be worshipped not just with the mind but with the eyes. St. John said, “I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead, but I paint the image of God who became visible in the flesh, for if it is impossible to make a representation of a spirit, how much more impossible is it to depict the God who gives life to the spirit?”¹⁵

The Incarnation brought about a change in the relationship between God and human beings, so that the material became a means of grace through which God was revealed to humankind. There continued to be those who disagreed, insisting that God is Spirit only, but in Orthodox thought God becoming flesh in Jesus of Nazareth forever

¹⁴ St. John of Damascus, *On Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 21.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

changed the way in which God is revealed. For the Orthodox, the revelation of the spiritual through the material continues to this day. God speaks through the icon.

In his apologies, St. John also made a clear distinction between two kinds of worship: adoration and veneration. In St. John's thought, and in Orthodox theology, adoration is worship of God and belongs only to God. Adoration of anyone or anything other than God is indeed idolatry and therefore absolutely wrong. Veneration, however, is the honoring of God's friends and companions. The Orthodox do not adore an icon, for that would be idolatry. They venerate an icon, and thereby honor the friend of God there depicted. This is important because the image is so nearly identified with the prototype, or model from which the image was made, that to honor the image is to give honor, and thus worship, to the original. St. John said, "An image is of like character with its prototype, but with a certain difference. . . . The Son is the living, essential, and precisely similar Image of the Invisible God, bearing the entire Father within Himself, equal to Him in all things, except that He is begotten by Him, the Begetter."¹⁶ In venerating an icon, one adores God.

Iconography flourished in Russia starting with Russia's conversion to Christianity in the tenth century. Of particular importance for iconography and for Russia was the Hesychast Movement. Hesychasm comes from the Greek word for stillness. It is the spiritual discipline of listening to God "to gather up the whole of a person's life in response to God."¹⁷ It is, of course, an ancient practice, highlighted in verses such as Psalm 46:10, "Be still and know that I am God." Orthodoxy simply valued stillness and encouraged its development among its followers.

¹⁶Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ John Baggley, *Festival Icons for the Christian Year* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), 174.

Hesychasm addressed the central question of how God is revealed to humans. Hesychasts experienced direct revelation of God personally, rather than indirectly. Furthermore, having experienced a direct revelation of God, Hesychasts believed that humans could achieve full union with God, or theosis. Saint Athanasius said, “God became man so that man might become God.”¹⁸ Thus, the Hesychasts were comfortable with symbolism to depict the divine.

Iconographers, especially, nourished within themselves this discipline of listening to God so that their icons grew out of their spirituality. Their icons emerged from their union with God. Iconographers did not sign their works, for the icons they painted were not done for their own personal recognition or glory, but for the glory of God. Five to ten centuries later, therefore, we do not know the names of most iconographers from the real heyday of icons. A few names, however, have come down to us across the centuries. Perhaps the best known today is Andrei Rublev of the fifteenth century¹⁹. Rublev worked in the studios of the Master Dionysius. Their icons reveal their spiritual perception. Ouspensky says, “These marvelous, famous iconographers, Daniel, Andrei, his disciple, and *many others* who were like them, had such virtuous zeal for fasting and the monastic life that they were able to receive divine grace. They constantly raised their mind and thought to the divine, immaterial light, and their bodily eye toward the images of Christ, of his All-pure Mother and of all the saints painted with material colors.”²⁰

The most famous of Rublev's icons is “The Old Testament Trinity.” The icon radiates light, though it contains within it no source of light. The light conveys both the

¹⁸ Gennadios Limouris, *The Microcosm and Macrocosm of the Icon: Theology, Spirituality and Worship in Colour, Windows on Eternity*, 1990, 100.

¹⁹ Irinia Kyzlasova, *Russian Icons: 14th-16th Centuries*, Translated by Sergei Volynets (Leningrad, USSR: Aurora Art Publishers, 1988), plates 45-47.

²⁰ Ouspensky, 260.

message of light and love that Rublev may have been trying to depict, but also the light that he experienced through his own spiritual depth. Henri Nouwen, in his meditation on this icon, describes it as “a holy place to enter and stay within.”²¹ It is a good example of the connection of the iconographer's own spiritual depth and the spirituality conveyed through the icon.

The classic definition of an icon is that it is a window into heaven, or “a window on the border between this world and the other.”²² While icons can serve as teaching tools, their primary purpose is not didactic but spiritual, even eschatological. Petro B.T. Bilaniuk says, “Through them one glimpses the reality beyond; and through them the reality beyond touches us, and we sense contact with the great Holiness of the *mysterium tremendum*.”²³ Icons cannot be separated from prayer, indeed they are a means or form of prayer. Prayer for many Western Christians, especially Protestants, is often verbal and intellectual. Prayer has to do with the mind and the lips. Prayer for the Orthodox is visual. Icons enable prayer to begin with the eyes. Baggley says, “Visual attentiveness can allow a more receptive type of praying to unfold.”²⁴ Ultimately, this takes us back to hesychasm, to the sense of stillness and listening, which the great iconographers practiced. Icons are one way in which the faithful can learn to listen and be attentive to God. Certainly Orthodoxy includes many verbal prayers said before specific icons, and these prayers help to elaborate on the truths shown in the icon. The spoken prayers are a part of the formal worship of the Orthodox Church. They supplement and develop the

²¹ Henri Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying With Icons* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1987), 20.

²² Stefan Brenske, *Icons, Windows on Eternity*, (Germany: Oberauer, 1996).

²³ Petro B.T. Bilaniuk, “The Ultimate Reality and Meaning Expressed in Eastern Christian Icons,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1982), 297.

²⁴ Baggley, *Festival Icons For the Christian Year*, 7.

prayer, which begins with the eyes, but can never replace or substitute for the icons themselves.

The Orthodox Church's understanding that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ changed the relationship between God and human beings, making the material a means of grace, suggests for us that visual symbols are indeed appropriate as aids for worship. Furthermore, the Orthodox Church teaches us that prayer itself can be visual, a new and sometimes startling thought to many Protestants, for whom prayer has more typically been aural and intellectual. The use of icons models for us visual symbols as means to prayer. Since prayer is a primary vehicle by which we encounter God, icons ultimately model for us the use of visual symbols as aids to worship.

The Altar

Let us move on now to consider the role the altar has played in Christian worship. We will show that the altar has been an important visual symbol from early on in the history of Christianity.

The altar has very often been one of the primary visual symbols for Christian worship. Harold King connects it back to Christianity's Jewish roots when he says of the sanctuary as the place of the altar, "It is the Christian Holy of Holies."²⁵ As we saw in the Chapter Two, the ark of the covenant was kept within the Holy of Holies in the temple. The Holy of Holies was the inner sanctum of the temple, entered only once a year by the high priest and no one else. The ark symbolized God's presence among the people and God's leadership of them. If the sanctuary is to be equated with the Holy of Holies, then it may not be too far a stretch to see the altar as similar to the ark of the

²⁵ Harold C. King, *The Chancel and The Altar* (London, UK: A.R. Mowbray & Co., Ltd., 1911), 69.

covenant, in that the altar too communicates God's presence. Geoffrey Webb goes so far as to assert, "The altar represents her Lord Himself."²⁶ Webb supports this claim by referring to the Roman Breviary Office for the Dedication of the Lateran, November 9, nocturn ii., lesson iv., "The altar which, anointed with oil, denotes the representation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is our Altar, Victim, and Priest."²⁷ As the ark represented the presence of Yahweh for the Hebrew people, so the altar symbolizes the presence of Jesus Christ for Christians. Webb suggests that the altar goes even beyond being a visual symbol, "But the altar does more than represent Our Lord, it interprets Him to the eye with an ordered variety denied to the most perfect statue of Him."²⁸ As interpretation of Christ, the altar moves from being a symbol to something which calls people into a living relationship with Christ.

Given this important role, for many branches of Christianity, the altar is then the focal point of the church. Even more than that, it is the very reason for the existence of a church building. Cyril Pocknee says, "May we remind our readers that it is as well to remember that the temple exists for the altar and not the altar for the temple. Consequently the church should be built round the Lord's Table and planned accordingly."²⁹ King says much the same thing in slightly different words, "A church without an altar would cease to be a church, and would be nothing more than a meeting house."³⁰ The altar defines the very purpose of the church.

²⁶ Geoffrey Webb, *The Liturgical Altar* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1933), 18.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 100.

²⁹ Cyril E. Pocknee, *The Christian Altar: In History and Today* (London, UK: A.R. Mowbray & Co., Ltd., 1963), 15.

³⁰ King, 83.

This critical role of the altar is centered on its function as the place of sacrifice. J. O'Connell gives us a succinct definition when he observes, "An altar is an elevated structure upon which sacrifice is offered."³¹ King expands on this and draws in Christian theology when he says, "In the Christian religion the sacrifice is its very centre; from this everything else radiates."³² The sacrifice referred to is that of Christ. Pocknee takes us back to Christ's sacrifice and its connection to the altar when he points to the Last Supper, "The starting point for any consideration of the Christian Altar is the Holy Eucharist in the Upper Room on the first Maundy Thursday. Here a meal took place with a sacrificial background at a wooden table."³³ While Jesus actually died on the cross, of course, he anticipated that death in the bread and cup of the final meal he shared with the disciples. The Apostle Paul lifts up the sacrificial aspect to that meal, when pointing to the Last Supper, he says, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (I Corinthians 11:26, NRSV.)

This takes us then to the Christian altar's connection to the table at which that last meal was eaten, and therefore the altar's role as the place upon which the Eucharist is consecrated. O'Connell says, "The earliest ideas of it were derived from the table of the Last Supper and from the Cross."³⁴ King suggests that the altar picks up not only on the act of the Eucharist, but on the Eucharist's testimony to basic Christian teachings, "Take away the doctrine of the Incarnation and the Atonement from the Christian religion and what is there left? In Christian worship the Holy Eucharist stands as a witness to these

³¹ J. O'Connell, *Church Building and Furnishing: The Church's Way, A Study in Liturgical Law* (London, UK: Burns & Oates, 1955), 133.

³² Ibid.

³³ Pocknee, 33.

³⁴ O'Connell, 133.

doctrines. The altar itself for this reason is the most essential piece of furniture or ‘ornament’ (using the word in its Prayer Book sense) in the church.”³⁵

Webb outlines a progression in the form of the altar connected to the understanding of its function, “The traditional form of the Christian altar has been traced to the three distinct sources of table, tomb and altar.”³⁶

Originating then from the table at which the Last Supper was eaten, the Christian altar began as a simple wooden table. King notes, “The first Christian altars were undoubtedly constructed of wood. When Christians met in the upper chamber of a Jewish private house or in the atria of a Roman mansion for the purpose of the breaking of the bread the ordinary table provided the altar, and the communicants sat around it.”³⁷ In this earliest usage, one would presume that the table used on Sundays as altar, on Mondays served as the household table.

As time went on, and the church no longer gathered in private homes, the altar also changed form. Webb suggests, “The second form originated early in the second century from the practice of celebrating Mass in the catacombs on a marble slab placed upon a martyr’s tomb.”³⁸ At this point, the altar’s symbolism of Christ’s sacrifice expanded to include that of the sacrifices of Christ’s followers. O’Connell tells us that it became common to place within an altar relics from martyrs, “It *enshrines relics* of martyrs, because from the earliest Christian times the Mass was associated with the

³⁵ King, 83.

³⁶ Webb, 25.

³⁷ King, 84.

³⁸ Webb, 25.

martyrs . . . and in the earlier centuries the placing of relics in the altar was the chief element in its consecration.”³⁹

As Christianity was first tolerated and then embraced by society, it allowed for the erection of church buildings, which, in turn, allowed for more permanent and elaborate altars. In Webb’s terminology, they moved from being tables to tombs and finally altars, “The third form arose after the Peace of Constantine in 313, when the permanent stone or marble altars became possible.”⁴⁰ It is not our place here to go into this history in depth, but we can observe that the church developed stricter rules about the treatment of the altar. For example, there were debates about how many candles should be placed on the altar, the covering of the altar with cloths, the construction of side altars within churches, or where an altar could be built. O’Connell says, “An altar on which Mass is celebrated, or at which the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, may not be built under an apartment used as a bedroom.”⁴¹

The tremendous detail regarding the altar points to its importance as a symbol for the church. O’Connell explains, “According to the mind of the Church an altar is primarily the stone of sacrifice on which the divine Victim is offered; it is also the sacred table from which the people are fed with the body of Christ, and a tomb in which the relics of the martyrs lie buried.”⁴² Like the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle, and the temple, the altar’s role in symbolizing the presence of God is so great that it takes on some of God’s very power, “The altar is hallowed by a solemn rite, becomes a sacred thing, that it may more perfectly symbolize Christ; it acquires a certain spiritual power

³⁹ O’Connell, 133.

⁴⁰ Webb, 26.

⁴¹ O’Connell, 153.

⁴² Ibid., 161.

for the more perfect fulfillment of the chief act of the Sacred Liturgy,” says O’Connell.⁴³ As we saw with ark, tabernacle, and temple, the altar then is treated with great respect.

Clearly, the altar is visible. The visible object assists worshippers in communicating with God primarily through the meaning attributed to it as witness to the Eucharist and its associated testimony to the doctrines of Incarnation and Atonement. In these ways it is an aid to worship.

Stained Glass Windows

In our discussion of historical information regarding visual symbols as aids to worship, we began with a largely Orthodox practice, that of praying with icons. We moved on to look at the place of the altar which predated any division of the Christian Church into East and West or Catholic and Protestant, though in more recent years the altar’s role is most clearly addressed by Catholic scholars. Let us finally reflect on the role of stained glass windows, which have been used in both Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. In our consideration, we will examine concerns raised about the appropriateness of stained glass windows as well as the ways in which stained glass windows were valued and appreciated. We will show that, for some, stained glass windows helped to draw worshippers into the liturgy of the church and even into the Biblical stories depicted.

That stained glass has played an important role is highlighted for us by a number of authors. Sarah Hall notes, “Stained glass has been used in churches for over a millennium, and the windows created over the course of the centuries number in the

⁴³ Ibid., 133.

hundreds of thousands.”⁴⁴ William Morgan observes, “Stained glass was one of the artistic glories of the Middle Ages.”⁴⁵

One of the purposes attributed to stained glass windows has been that of education: they presented the stories of the Bible in picture form for those unable to read, or so it has often been said. “Among functions claimed for monumental picture cycles in the Middle Ages is that of teaching the Scriptures,” begins Madeline H. Caviness in her discussion of the subject.⁴⁶ Caviness cites John Dolberl who said, “They formed . . . the picture-boxes of the Middle Ages, by which the clergy taught their congregations, fully realizing that that which the illiterate cannot comprehend from writing could be made plain to them by pictures.”⁴⁷

Caviness raises a number of questions about this claim. It is not our purpose here to repeat her entire discussion; however, it does serve us to note her caution. Observing that many windows were not accessible to the laity, and further that they were often esoteric, Caviness says, “Viewing their educational role in that context, the larger one of a ‘Bible of the Poor’ becomes less likely.”⁴⁸ Meredith Lillich points out that a number of stained glass windows were in monasteries which were not accessible to the general public. Therefore, she says, “A work of art in a monastery may, like the arts elsewhere, be handsome or decorative or even present narrative stories, but its subjects do not

⁴⁴ Sarah Hall, *The Color of Light: Commissioning Stained Glass for a Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), 39.

⁴⁵ William Morgan, Stained Glass: Yesterday and Today, *Theology Today* 45, Ja 1989, 441.

⁴⁶ Madeline H. Caviness, “Biblical Stories in Windows: Were They Bibles for the Poor? *The Bible in the Middle Ages: Its Influence on Literature and Art*, Ed. Bernard S. Levy, (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1992), 102.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 109.

function primarily for instruction. The monastic audience is already well instructed.”⁴⁹ Caviness ultimately concludes, “I tend to see these windows indeed as Bibles of the laity, but it is a Bible transformed into popular romance, more vividly reflecting contemporary sociological structures than esoteric spiritual truths.”⁵⁰ Stained glass windows may have served some role in teaching, but that may not have been their primary purpose.

As windows, stained glass worked with light in fulfilling its purpose. It is light which points us to one of the chief functions of stained glass windows. An important figure in the history of stained glass windows is the twelfth century Abbot Suger of the Abbey of Saint-Denis in France. Hall says of him, “Suger, inspired by the belief of the fifth-century writer Pseudo-Dionysius that visible things reveal the invisible, held that natural light mirrors the light of God.”⁵¹ Abbot Suger is known for adding color to natural light. Hall says, “It is agreed that Abbot Suger of Chartres is remembered, not because he was a great Bishop, but because he was the greatest colorist of whom the world has record.”⁵² In justifying his use of light and color, Abbot Suger inscribed the following on the church doors at Saint-Denis:

Whoever thou art, if thou seekest to extol the glory of these doors,
marvel not at the gold and the expense but at the craftsmanship of the work.
Bright is the noble work; but being nobly bright, the work
should brighten the mind, so that they may travel,
through the true lights, to the True Light, where Christ is the door.⁵³

⁴⁹ Meredith Parsons Lillich, *Monastic Stained Glass: Patronage and Style. Monasticism and the Arts* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse Univ. Pr., 1984), 208.

⁵⁰ Caviness, 147.

⁵¹ Hall, 41.

⁵² James Sheldon, *Stained Glass, Religion in Life*, 7, no. 3, Sum. 1938, 421.

⁵³ Hall, 43.

Abbot Suger's inscription emphasizes for us one of the functions of stained glass: to call the worshipper into the light of Christ. Stained glass thus served a theological purpose in revealing (and reveling) in God as Light.

Sheldon points to the combination of light and color as joyful. He cites the cathedral at Leon, Spain as "the gayest, most joyful cathedral to be found in Europe, unbelievably harmonious and happy."⁵⁴ In support, Sheldon quotes Helene Boussinesq, whom he describes as Critic, Paris, "The first sensation on entering Leon is that of sheer joy, perfect elation (not exultation)."⁵⁵

The visual symbol of this light and color then become aids to worship as they communicate to people God's *light* and God's joy. Sheldon refers to a Des Moines banker who said, "To walk into Leon Cathedral is to walk straight into the presence of the Living God."⁵⁶

In her examination of monastic stained glass, Meredith Parsons Lillich observed that such windows included figures from the monastic community alongside Biblical figures, "It is therefore no surprise to find the abbots of medieval communities, fathers of their flocks, physically present in gospel scenes: Abbot Suger prostrates himself at the Virgin's feet in the Annunciation panel at Saint-Denis."⁵⁷ In explanation of this, Lillich notes, "Monastic spirituality stressed the telescoping of time and encouraged mystical participation in divine events."⁵⁸

This takes us to another way in which stained glass windows served as aids to worship. In depicting a Biblical scene, the worshipper could enter into the scene and

⁵⁴ Sheldon, 423.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 424.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 425.

⁵⁷ Lillich, 213.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

participate in the events there shown, much like might be done with guided meditation today. So Lillich says of stained glass windows, “Their function is not to instruct but to provide stimulus for introspection and encouragement for the meditations of the monks who spend so many hours in their company.”⁵⁹ The visual symbol of the stained glass window drew the worshipper into prayer and therefore aided worship by calling the worshipper for example, to prostrate himself at Mary’s feet. The visual symbol of stained glass aided worship by both creating a mood for worship and by inviting worshippers to enter into the divine encounter in a mystical way.

As mentioned earlier, stained glass windows brought forth light and color into the worship setting, thus communicating God’s Light and Joy. Even apart from the depiction of scenes from the Bible or Biblical figures, the light and color created a mood for worship different from what would have been possible otherwise. Hall says, “Stained glass has the unique ability to modify the visual environment by adding color and form to the space, thereby changing the nature of light itself. In a church, this visual experience can serve as a bridge to the spiritual.”⁶⁰ Add to this general environment a figure or a scene, and the stained glass window was further enhanced as a medium for the worship taking place. Hall notes, “The purpose of medieval religious art was to create a visual symbol – an icon – that would draw viewers into the liturgy.”⁶¹

Stained glass met with its share of opposition. One source came from Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian monks, from the same era as the stained glass champion, Abbot Suger. Their opposition was to both the use of color and of figures. Lillich explains:

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Hall, 55.

⁶¹ Ibid., 39.

The elimination of images clearly reflects the teaching of Saint Bernard: 'There is here (in contemplation), as I think, no need or use for material, sense-transmitted images of Christ's Flesh or cross, or any other representations which belong to the weakness of His mortality.' . . . as the Cistercian imageless patterns free the mind from what Bernard regarded as obstacles and impediments to contemplation, so does the colorless medium eliminate any obstacle to the eye's perception of sunlight, that Light which is God.⁶²

The Cistercian opposition to stained glass was such that some windows may have been destroyed. Hall observes, "A further admonition came in 1182: 'Stained glass windows are to be replaced within the space of two years, otherwise the abbot, prior and cellarer are henceforth all to fast on bread and water every sixth day until they are replaced.'"⁶³

Out of the Cistercian opposition developed another form of what may still be called stained glass: grisaille. This style, says Hall, "based on foliage and geometric designs in clear and light tints, were made for the Cistercian abbeys."⁶⁴ Even these windows, however, became aids to worship. Lillich observes of them, "The designs are of an elaborate intricacy, often complicated to excess. Even the simple patterns are fascinating: one could look at them for hours. . . . I would like to suggest that Cistercian grisailles are hypnotic to a purpose. They are *Andachtbilde*: they are mandalas, if you like; they provided emblems and abstract forms for the monks' meditations."⁶⁵

Lillich goes on to note that the patterns of grisailles were ordered and mathematical, "it is my belief that a similar metaphysical significance for number and ratio lies behind Cistercian geometric patterns."⁶⁶ Grisailles became aids to worship not

⁶² Lillich, 218.

⁶³ Hall, 42.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Lillich, 218.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 222.

by inviting the worshipper to participate in a Biblical scene or being immersed in color, but communicating Divine order.

A further opposition to stained glass came later, during the Reformation. This time the opposition was based on the Reformation's emphasis on reason over participation in mystery as the goal of worship. Hall says, "Colored light in a church emphasized mystery but religious focus in the period had moved toward preaching and scripture. The 'Age of Enlightenment' desired a clear, lucid light to illuminate the church and make visible the rationality of its classically detailed geometric interiors."⁶⁷ William A. Dyrness says the Reformation leader, John Calvin, "is saying that there is a higher and more direct way of grasping what is true than by use of images – an inward faith in the preached Word."⁶⁸ Daniel Clendenin points to Luther and Zwingli's donning of academic robes as an indication of the emphasis on the Word as the means of revelation, "This simple change of dress symbolized a radical shift that has characterized the Protestant West ever since: that the knowledge of God is mediated primarily through the written Word."⁶⁹

The Reformation's criticism of stained glass (and other forms of visual symbolism) was based thus, not so much on its use of color and image (as was the Cistercian opposition) as on a different understanding of worship. Dyrness says, "In its simplest form, the Reformation – and Calvin in particular – introduced . . . a change from an objective to a personal piety . . . consisting of an inward cleaving to Christ and his promises. This, of course, involved the application of the mind and did not require

⁶⁷ Hall, 46.

⁶⁸ William A. Dyrness, *Visual Faith: Art, Theology, and Worship in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 53.

⁶⁹ Daniel Clendenin, "Why I'm Not Orthodox." *Christianity Today*. Vol. 41, Is. 1, Jan. 6, 1997. 32.

visual meditation.”⁷⁰ This focus on the Word meant that worship was primarily aural and not visual.

As the Second Commandment called us to think about our understanding of God and of the nature of worship, so the opposition to stained glass from sources such as the Cistercians and some leaders within the Reformation calls us to think about the nature of worship itself.

In this brief survey of the history of stained glass, we have shown that it has often been an aid to worship in several ways. It may have served to educate people by teaching them through pictures, though that is not the most important use of stained glass. More helpful is stained glass’s history as something that created an atmosphere of light and joy and thus called a worshipper into God’s Light, and also the way in which a worshipper could participate in a Divine Event by entering meditatively into the picture. Grisaille offered an alternative that echoed God’s Order. We have also shown that the Reformation’s approach to a more personal piety calls us to think carefully about worship. Stained glass shows us that visual symbols can be aids to worship but used with a clear understanding of worship itself.

Conclusion

We have looked at three ways in which visual symbols have been aids to worship through the course of Christian history: icons, altar, and stained glass. We have seen that these visual symbols were connected with theological doctrines. Orthodoxy found that belief in the Incarnation of Jesus changed the relationship between God and human beings so that the material became a means to grace. The altar’s function as the place

⁷⁰ Dyrness, 53.

where the Eucharist was blessed became a testimony both to the Incarnation and to the Atonement. Stained glass windows created an atmosphere of light and in so doing communicated the light of God. Thus while icons, altar, and stained glass were all visual objects, they also became visual symbols because they communicated something about God and in so doing they were aids to worship.

We have also seen that the use of such visual symbols raised questions about idolatry. As we saw with questions around the second commandment in Chapter Two, so questions about the appropriateness of these visual symbols led to a need for an understanding of worship. Adoration versus veneration, and the Word versus participation in mystery, both call us to consider the nature of worship. We have seen that throughout Christian history, while some worshippers have rejected the use of visual symbols, others have come to understand that visual symbols can be aids to worship.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE USE OF VISUAL SYMBOLS WITHIN CONTEMPORARY WORSHIP

Worship within the last twenty years or so has incorporated the use of visual symbols in a wide variety of ways. The use of the phrase contemporary worship here does not refer to worship style (as in contemporary worship versus traditional worship) but worship in the present day versus worship as discussed earlier in Chapter Three.

The use of visual symbols varies significantly from denomination to denomination and congregation to congregation. Our purpose here is not to contrast the differences in the use of visual symbols based on denominational affiliation, nor to do a comprehensive study of the use of every possible visual symbol within all churches today. Such studies are beyond the scope of this dissertation. Rather, our purpose is to do an overview of the different ways visual symbols are used in order to determine how they can be aids to worship. This will include an exploration of the role of liturgical or visual art in a postmodern era and a sampling of the possibilities which exist. We will show that, used carefully and thoughtfully, visual symbols can be aids to worship, or in other words that they can help either to draw worshippers into the presence of God or that they can help worshippers to respond to God's presence. Our sampling will look at some of the ways in which these visual symbols do both of those things.

Because there is such a divergence of ways in which visual symbols are used, we will look at several broad categories of symbols: the use of seasonal symbols, based largely on the Christian year; permanent symbols such as those which are rooted in the architecture of a building, like stained glass windows; and the ways in which electronic

symbols such as computer generated graphics can serve as aids to worship, and other occasional symbols used as aids to worship.

The Role of Liturgical Art in a Postmodern Era

Scholars like Stanley Grenz and Leonard Sweet have urged the church to recognize that the world in which we live, minister, and worship is not the same as it was a hundred, fifty, or even ten years ago. They are calling the church to learn to reach out to what they and many others call the postmodern era. Sweet says, “More and more of us are realizing that the world has changed, a new language has emerged, and if we want to communicate, we need to speak it.”¹ It is not our purpose here to define postmodernism but to understand just enough of the postmodern language to address how visual symbols can aid worship. Robert Webber says, “The new postmodern shape of communication has shifted to a more symbolic form.”² Sweet puts it this way, “Images are now the narrative, words the declarative (‘Look at this!’ ‘See how this works!’). Words now support images; they don’t create images themselves. Visual ideas rather than scripts set today’s story lines.”³ In other words, the postmodern era speaks through the visual not only through the aural. Sally Morgenthaler agrees, “Yet most of the unchurched people we want to reach are used to communication of a different sort. They relate to life through the highly visual world of television and the tactile domains of recreation, food, and sex.”⁴ David Archer tells us, “There is a movement within society towards a greater

¹ Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, Jerry Haselmayer, *A is For Abductive: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 17-18.

² Robert Webber, “Convergence Worship: A Blending of Traditions.” *Experience God In Worship*, Ed. by Michael D. Warren (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2000), 41.

³ Sweet et al, 153.

⁴ Sally Morgenthaler, *Worship Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 134.

sensual participation. Today, leisure managers, supermarket sales staff and many others are being made aware of MSE: Momentous Sensory Experience.”⁵ In our discussion, we will focus on the sense of sight, though Archer points us to the use of other senses as well.

For those of us raised in the modern era with its dependence on reason, this may seem like a new thing. Morganthaler, however, reminds us that reliance on the visual is hardly new at all:

New Testament Christians clearly understood the value of words, but they also understood what Coffey and Morestaing understood: ‘We are multi-sensory beings who respond to multi-sensory communication.’ They did not divide the spiritual from the material as we tend to do. The early Christians knew that, just as God in all God’s divine and infinite mystery became ‘material’ – *tangible* to us in Jesus Christ – God again becomes tangible to us as we employ the resources of all creation in worship.⁶

It turns out that the postmodern language is one that conjugates visual images more than it does words. Susan J. White points out that Christian worship, “continues to be an experience of the ear rather than of the eye.”⁷ She argues that “Successful worship . . . is that which stimulates a number of senses at once.”⁸ Visual images, therefore, may be one way to broaden worship’s ability to speak in a multi-sensory fashion. John Ortberg and Pam Howell suggest this very thing, “Music, Scripture, *visual arts*, prayer, silence – all these and more must be pressed into service to involve the whole person in praising the fullness of God.”⁹ As we shall see later in Chapter Six on Learning Styles, different people learn through different styles, and at the same time, most people can and

⁵ David Archer, “The Postmodern Challenge to Worship” *Epworth Review*, Vol. 27, No 2, April 2000, 7.

⁶ Morganthaler, 134.

⁷ Susan J. White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1984), 114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁹ John Ortberg and Pam Howell, “Can You Engage Both Heart and Mind? The Power of Connecting the Whole Self With The Holy God” *Leadership*, Vol. 20, Sp. ’99, 34. *Italics mine.*

do learn with more than one sense. To truly offer oneself to God does indeed require us to engage the whole person. Graham Johnston, who primarily speaks about the use of technology in worship, suggests that liturgical art has its place in postmodern worship, “The use of art and image can reframe the message from God’s Word with arresting force. Paintings, drama, or a song can break through postmodern people’s smugness (the ‘I’ve heard it all before’ attitude) by appealing to a different dimension of their being.”¹⁰ In order for worshippers to encounter God, something has to break through smugness, boredom, fear, or any other aspect to our beings. Ortberg and Howell describe the problems when there is a lack of visual symbolism, “A friend of ours commented recently that the lack of symbols at most of our services made worship harder for him – his eyes didn’t have much to do.”¹¹ Visual images can both provide something for the eyes to do, and having put the eyes to work may also break through to lead a person to respond to the encounter with God.

White and White define liturgical art in such a way that they help us to truly think about its role in worship when they say, “Essentially, liturgical art is art before which we say our prayers. Its chief function is to make visible the unseen presence of God . . . It is art that commands us to take off our shoes as we recognize that the ground on which we stand is holy, that we are in the presence of God.”¹²

¹⁰ Graham Johnston, *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 166.

¹¹ Ortberg and Howell, 34.

¹² James F. White and Susan J. White, *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1988), 156.

Seasonal Symbols

To discuss the use of seasonal symbols as aids to worship, it will be helpful to briefly look at the role the calendar plays in worship. The small book, *Seasons of the Gospel*, a supplemental resource made available through The United Methodist Church, notes, “Christianity is a religion that takes time seriously. History is where God is made known. Without time, there is no knowledge of God. For it is through actual events happening in historical time that God is revealed. . . .Christian worship is built upon this understanding of time as where God acts in self revelation.”¹³ Time as the forum for God’s self revelation is then made known through various seasons. A different tradition, that of the United Church of Christ, echoes much the same sentiment in its *Book of Worship*, “Christians, from the New Testament age to the present, regard time not only as a product of nature but also as a parable of God’s saving action in human history.”¹⁴

This use of time as a way to reveal the saving acts of God has developed into the calendar of the church year, organized around the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and Pentecost. Worship resources from various mainline traditions, such as the Episcopal Church, the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church all use these seasons, with only slight variations between them as to the specifics of meaning and ritual.¹⁵ Specific colors are associated with each season.

¹³ *Seasons of the Gospel: Resources for the Christian Year for the Use of United Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 12-13.

¹⁴ *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ* (New York, NY: Office of Church Life and Leadership, 1986), 19.

¹⁵ See *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1979); *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978); *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993); *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ* (New York, NY: Office for Church Life and Leadership, 1986); *The Book of Worship* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992).

As Abbot Suger, mentioned earlier, reveled in the use of color, so too color itself can be for us a visual symbol. In asking how to proclaim the gospel visually, James White writes, “The simplest concept is just to use pure **color**. . . . Color helps form general expectations for any occasion.”¹⁶ Nancy Chinn in her book *Spaces for Spirit: Adorning The Church* says, “Our spirits respond to color combinations and harmonies with mood. Color affects us with both personal and culturally-bound associations. . . . The color becomes an invitation to enter a holy space, or a barrier to warn us to be careful.”¹⁷ Liturgically based colors include blue and purple for Advent and Lent, white and gold for Christmas and Easter, red for Pentecost Day, and green for Epiphany. The specific colors in and of themselves may draw the worshipper’s eye and provide visual appeal. Most churches that follow the liturgical year and the associated colors, ascribe particular meaning to those colors. For example, The United Church of Christ says of the colors for Advent, “The seasonal color, purple, announces Christ’s royalty. In some traditions, blue is used, jointly symbolizing royalty and hope.”

It seems likely that many worshippers within even these liturgical churches, do not all understand the meaning behind the colors of the church year. Such worshipper’s experience of being drawn into God’s presence may be enhanced, therefore, by teaching them the reasons for the use of particular colors for particular seasons. Marva Dawn affirms this when she says of Christian symbols in general, “What symbols denote,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Nancy Chinn, *Spaces For Spirit: Adorning The Church* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1998), 22.

however, must be taught, and churches must find new ways to involve the uninitiated in the delight and mystery of their meaning.”¹⁸

Color does not just appear on its own, however. Usually it comes via some specific medium. This introduces for us the concept of textile arts, most often in the form of paraments, vestments, and banners. Indeed, the texture of the fabric used can reinforce the meaning conveyed by the color itself. *Seasons of the Gospel* suggests, “We are coming to realize the need to be equally sensitive to hues and textures. A silk purple might be less preferable for Lent than a rough-textured blue or gray. And a splendid gold might be better for Easter than a rough white material.”¹⁹ Nancy Chinn laments:

It is a shame that dependency on catalogs and mass-produced objects has limited some people’s appreciation of the colors green, red, purple, black, blue, white, rose and gold. As churches develop their collections of textiles, it is important to determine what shades of green look right in the particular space, given its environment, particularly its light both natural and artificial.²⁰

The impact of the penitential nature of the season of Lent, therefore, can be conveyed by means of the rough textures used in the paraments which hang from the pulpit or lectern or the cloth on the altar as well as by the color. When these are then contrasted with bright and rich colors and textures for Easter the joy of Christ’s resurrection is proclaimed visually in potentially powerful ways.

Colors and textures are also used in banners hung in the sanctuary. While such banners are not always coordinated with the church seasons, they often are. Robert Webber tells about the way in which banners aided his encounter with God when he attended a Lenten service at which banners bore the theme of the day, “Buried with

¹⁸ Marva Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for the Turn-of-the-Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmann’s Publishing Co., 1995) 270.

¹⁹ *Seasons of the Gospel*, 40.

²⁰ Chinn, 23.

Christ in baptism Raised to walk in newness of life.” Webber says, “These banners drew me into the spirit of Lent which has as its dominant image our baptism and death in Christ. The banners spoke to me, calling me into a remembrance of my baptismal vows. I quietly reflected on my life and on my calling, as a baptized person, to always live in the waters of my baptism into Christ.”²¹ The visual symbol prompted Webber’s memory and that in turn led him to reflect on his relationship with Christ.

Kathy Black lifts up another use of banners in her book *Culturally Conscious Worship*. In addressing the ministry of a multi-racial church, she describes a banner, “Prominently displayed in the sanctuary is a large banner that displays an image of a church building and a globe showing the various continents of our world. Cords of thread emanate from the center of the church outward to the various parts of the world represented by members of the congregation. Visually this affirms a shared story.”²² Such a banner draws the diverse members of the body of Christ together so that they can encounter God together. The visual symbol aids their life together.

As noted above, banners are often coordinated with the seasons and therefore change throughout the year. They need not be permanent features of the worship space. White and White affirm this value, “Usually textiles are portable and can be changed as we progress through our yearly recital of the works of Christ. This gives a variety to the feel of a building as the seasons and festivals change.”²³ While not every worshipper will notice that the paraments are purple today instead of green, and without some education many will not understand the meaning, the variety will at the least add interest to the

²¹ Robert E. Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 103.

²² Kathy Black, *Culturally Conscious Worship* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000), 92.

²³ White and White, 161.

worship setting. Variety in and of itself is not necessarily the key to encountering God in worship, but it may help to touch the worshipper's mood. White and White further note of paraments, "By color, texture, and design, these communicate the nature of the season or festival being celebrated."²⁴ Worship is not solely a conscious or intellectual experience. The atmosphere created by the color and texture of a banner or paraments will impact people's experience of God.

Particularly within liturgical churches, specific seasons call for specific symbols, such as a wreath with four candles lit during Advent, palms waved on Palm Sunday, or a cross draped in black on Good Friday. These seasonal symbols can be powerful ways of not only conveying the meaning of the season as developed over the course of Christian history, but they can draw the worshipper to encounter God by helping him or her participate in the stories of salvation. For example, a Palm Sunday procession in which worshippers wave palms places them squarely within the Biblical story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. No longer is the story simply words on paper or read by someone else. It becomes the worshipper's story as well. *From Ashes To Fire*, a supplemental resource of the United Methodist Church for the seasons of Lent and Easter, describes the importance of non-verbal means of proclaiming the Gospel, "The use of these resources should be accompanied by special attention to how forms of nonverbal communication may be employed as means to a living encounter with Christ, and to worship 'in spirit and in truth.'"²⁵

The possibilities of such seasonal symbols are too many to describe in detail here. It is enough for us to recognize their value as aids to worship by creating variety and

²⁴ White and White, 67.

²⁵ *From Ashes To Fire: Services of Worship for the Seasons of Lent and Easter with Introduction and Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1979), 16.

therefore interest to the worship service, by helping to teach about certain of the salvific acts of Christ, and by drawing the worshipper into the story itself.

Permanent Symbols

Except for house churches, which do not have church buildings, most churches have some permanent symbols as a part of their worship life. The building itself becomes a symbol, both for those who are a part of the community and for those outside it.

Thomas G. Long notes, “A worship space is a physical expression of what the worshippers here believe about the nature of God and the character of faith.”²⁶ In some way, the building conveys meaning – sometimes positive and sometimes negative. The Toppenish United Methodist Church in Toppenish, Washington has a large stained glass window depicting Lady Liberty knighting a World War I soldier. I once heard a child, who passed by the church on her way to school, describe it as a “scary place.” It turned out that she thought the window showed someone being stabbed. On the other hand, children who came to the church for tutoring learned to see it as a friendly place.

Permanent symbols, be they the architecture of the building or a stained glass window, are givens for those churches who have any kind of structure. While adaptations can be made, they often necessitate great expense, both financially and emotionally. Archer comments, “The traditional church with its large windows can often militate against the use of images on acetate or transparency. The worship area, seating, etc. will need to be much more flexible than is possible in many churches at present.”²⁷

As illustrated in the opening story in Chapter One, the architecture of the building

²⁶ Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute 2001), 68.

²⁷ Archer, 12.

presents every congregation with both limitations and possibilities. Our purpose here is to explore some of the ways the building itself and the permanent or semi permanent visual symbols within it (especially within the worship space) can become aids to helping worshippers encounter God.

White and White point out that the most important visual symbol is not the building itself, “*The primary symbol of Christian worship is always the community itself, assembled in Christ’s name.* His presence is known afresh in each gathering as the community comes together again and again to form the body of Christ.”²⁸ This truth was identified for me by the people of the church. In August of 2002, I gathered together a focus group within Toppenish UMC to discuss how visual symbols impacted them. We met in the sanctuary and I asked them to identify the visual symbols present there. Several people said that one symbol was the people who came there to worship. They used words like family, friends, and the faces of the children. They further stated that it was those people who were the most important visual symbol for them. Those congregations who for whatever reason do not have a physical building still retain this visual symbol. It is well for congregations who do have a physical structure to remember that the gathered community is the essential symbol of their worship. As White and White say, “A religion of the incarnation is not confined to past history but to a Christ whose presence is experienced in the life together of the community he established.”²⁹

Nevertheless, the vast majority of congregations, at least in the United States, do have physical structures and physical objects which become for them symbols of their belief. Earlier, in Chapter Two, we explored the way in which physical objects and

²⁸ White and White, 15 and 16.

²⁹ Ibid., 16.

structures were a part of the worship life of the Hebrew people. That legacy still impacts us today. In thinking about what a worship space should look like, Thomas Long reminds us, “There are no blueprints in Scripture, but there are at least three biblical models of places of worship – the tent, the temple, and the house (with a table).”³⁰ As we identified in our perusal of the place of the tent, it conveyed the sense that God traveled with the people on their journey. Long suggests, “If a worship space is to preserve the memory of the tabernacle, it should allow for movement within worship, should convey the truth that God’s people are constantly on foot serving God in the world, and should communicate that the place of worship is not a cul-de-sac but a way station for pilgrims on the move.”³¹ The ability to move freely within the worship service will vary significantly from congregation to congregation. Long’s words push congregations, and the designers of both worship services and worship spaces, to allow for and encourage movement so that it does not become a sedentary activity.

As we saw in our examination of the role of the temple in Hebrew worship, it conveyed God’s holiness even as it also conveyed God’s presence with His people. Long puts it this way, “The majesty of the temple was an awesome and holy presence.”³² The physical structure of a worship space can and sometimes actually does help worshippers to feel that they have entered into the majesty of God’s presence. Marva Dawn asks, “Do our worship services and the places in which we hold them give the sense of God’s presence in all of God’s infinite Otherness? Do our church buildings, as the house of God, symbolize the homeland of the soul?”³³ Daniel M. Harrell suggests that the ancient

³⁰ Long, 68.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 70.

³³ Dawn, 270.

traditions are most useful in communicating the mystery of God, “High church traditions and their preserved links to ancient church practice maintain mystery and ambiguity. Consequently, crosses, icons, candles, and colors are dusted off and returned to center stage. Their proven constancy as metaphors for Christian truth amid cultural change lend depth and meaning.”³⁴ Harrell does not explicitly say that older church buildings do a better job of conveying this mystery than do newer buildings, but I think it is fair to connect older buildings with the symbols he suggests should be dusted off and returned to center stage. At the same time, we need to allow for the possibility that a newer building can be designed and used in such a way as to communicate God’s mystery.

In his three-fold look at what the Bible suggests about models for worship spaces, Long concludes with the image of the house with a table. He says, “Especially for early Christians, house worship afforded the opportunity to gather at the table for the breaking of the bread.”³⁵ In Chapter Three, we looked at the place that the altar has played for Christian worship over the centuries and noted that the first altar was essentially the kitchen table on which a meal was prepared. White and White suggest a different image is now more appropriate, “The altar-table is no longer the kitchen counter of preparation, but the dining table at the center of a banquet.”³⁶ This raises for us the place of the Sacrament of Holy Communion within worship. That in itself is subject enough for an entire dissertation, so we will only offer a cursory glimpse. Daniel Benedict and Craig Miller describe the potential power of Communion, “The at-home service of the Lord’s Supper, while public, has a richness of imagery that evokes a complex set of emotions

³⁴ Daniel M. Harrell, “Post-Contemporary Worship: What? Ambiguity and Antiquity? Candles and Icons? A Glimpse at What Might Be Next.” *Leadership*, Vol. 20, Sp. ’99, 38.

³⁵ Long, 70.

³⁶ White and White, 61.

from solemn to celebrative.”³⁷ Whether a congregation celebrates communion each week or only occasionally, if it has an altar table (and not all do) the mere presence of the table in the worship space is a reminder of the sacrament and the presence of Christ thereby encountered. White and White connect the table with two other pieces of furniture in the sanctuary, “The chief liturgical furnishings – pulpit, altar-table, and baptismal font – are objects at the very center of the community’s life together.”³⁸ Such furnishings are at one level utilitarian, serving a useful function within the worship life of the congregation, and at another level they take on the symbolic meaning of those very functions: Word, Supper, and Baptism. Thus even in a congregation where, for example, the preacher no longer preaches from a pulpit, the pulpit may still retain the symbolism of the proclamation of the word. That symbolic meaning may fade over the years if for some time the pulpit is not used for preaching. In such an event, the congregation may need to consider whether the pulpit is still a helpful thing or whether it needs to be moved out of the way to make space for other purposes. Some churches have already done so. As we noted above, the permanent symbols present within any given sanctuary contain both limitations and possibilities. As time passes the symbolic message conveyed will change. Not all newer buildings retain the furnishings and symbols once assumed in older buildings. These changes reflect the theological changes which have taken place over the time which has passed.

The presence of stained glass within a building presents us with another permanent visual symbol. Unless the stained glass is a small piece hung at a window and not as the window itself, the stained glass is truly a piece of the architecture. Here the

³⁷ Daniel L. Benedict and Craig Kennet Miller, *Contemporary Worship For the 21st Century: Worship or Evangelism?* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1994), 45.

³⁸ White and White, 158.

limitations and possibilities are especially true. Earlier I mentioned the stained glass window at Toppenish UMC showing Lady Liberty knighting a World War I soldier. In a sanctuary originally built in 1922, this had once been a deeply meaningful symbol, especially as the window was paid for by the family of a soldier who was killed in the war. Seventy years later, however, a number of people within the congregation shuddered at this image and the civil religion it conveyed, but removing it was difficult if not impossible, for it was a significant part of a load bearing wall.

Such images are a given, however, within those congregations who have them. Perhaps in part for this very reason, the role of stained glass has changed over the years. George Barna points out, “Stained glass windows are passé in most places, tinted glass, perhaps, with electronically controlled window coverings is the choice for most modern facilities.”³⁹ Thus some newer facilities have little if any stained glass. On the other hand, White and White note the dual possibilities of stained glass along with such symbols as sculptures and paintings, “Such a piece of art can quickly become propaganda if it is seen as an object that tells a story, encourages action, or provokes nostalgia. But if it is seen as a reminder that the congregation worships ‘with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven,’ it can function as liturgical art.”⁴⁰ Dawn echoes this possibility when she observes that visual symbols such as stained glass can, “lift us to higher realms beyond that merely human.”⁴¹ In Chapter Three as we explored the history of stained glass, we looked at the ways in which Abbot Suger reveled in colored light as reflecting the Light of Christ. James White shares Abbot Suger’s sentiments, when he says, “Few human creations are more beautiful or more changing than the warm splash of

³⁹ Barna, 21.

⁴⁰ White and White, 159 and 160.

⁴¹ Dawn, 272.

colored light on cold stone or plaster.”⁴² Sarah Hall moves stained glass into the present when she observes, “Artistic visions have moved contemporary stained glass into a realm of layered images and meaning.”⁴³ Stained glass, when used in newer facilities, may simply allow for the visual symbol of the richness of color and light without feeling a need to present specific images.

Christians have long looked to the cross as one of the central symbols of their faith. *The Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (USA) states, “The cross is one of the oldest and most universally recognized symbols of Christianity.”⁴⁴ Mabel Stewart Boyter observes, “The Cross is considered one of the most sacred and important symbols used in churches. It is used more often than any other. Some churches and cathedrals have lighted crosses on top of them, some have crosses on the hymnbooks or altars, as well as other places.”⁴⁵ The Lutheran *Book of Occasional Services*, in the midst of an order for the dedication of worship furnishings, contains this prayer for the dedication of a cross or crucifix, “Accept this *cross/crucifix* which we offer in thanksgiving; may this sign of your Son’s triumph draw us to him who leads us with his banner of salvation.”⁴⁶ The cross, in various forms, is often a permanent and central visual symbol in a place of worship. It can draw worshippers into the presence of God by reminding them of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Dawn’s point, quoted earlier, that our crosses are sometimes too pretty, is an appropriate caution. Nevertheless, the presence of the cross in the worship space can be highly meaningful. One focus

⁴² James White, 107.

⁴³ Sarah Hall, 53.

⁴⁴ *The Book of Common Worship*, Presbyterian Church (USA) (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1993), 1107.

⁴⁵ Mabel Stewart Boyter, *An Introduction To Christian Symbolism* (Dallas: Choristers Guild, 1978), p. 13.

⁴⁶ *Occasional Services, A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 2003), 176.

group does not prove much of anything, but as an illustration I point to the group I mentioned earlier that I had gathered together. Next to the gathered community, this group stated that the large central cross in the chancel was the thing that drew them closest to God.

We have seen that there are many different permanent or semi permanent visual symbols present in Christian places of worship. Often they have long histories, stretching past the life of the particular congregation into the history of Christian worship and faith itself. That history or tradition can be a rich source of meaning for those who gather to seek God's presence. At the same time, that history also presents us with the risk that these symbols become meaningless by their very familiarity. Dawn asks, "If rock singers whose lyrics are violent or sexist or nihilistic wear crosses, then what power remains to the cross as the focal point of a worship space?"⁴⁷ Her point is well taken and should prompt Christians to reclaim the power of the cross – and most likely other symbols as well – by lifting up the God who can be encountered in such symbols.

Permanent visual symbols, including the church building itself, stained glass, and crosses, among others, can draw worshippers into the presence of God through beauty, color, and the meaning of the symbol. They may be the very places in which worshippers respond to God's presence and so they take on some of that meaning. As the Lady Liberty window at the Toppenish United Methodist Church demonstrates, however, churches must select their permanent symbols very carefully since those symbols will be present for a long time.

⁴⁷ Dawn, 271.

Electronic Symbols

As we saw in Chapter One, people like Tex Sample insist that the use of electronic symbols is nearly mandatory in order to reach a postmodern generation. Graham Johnston states, “Within our high-tech society, audiovisuals are the waters in which most people swim. . . . Based on the sheer weight of a lifetime of screen watching, researchers now argue that postmodern folks’ brains actually process information differently. The average postmodern listener will readily connect with high-tech communication.”⁴⁸ Wayne Schmidt puts it this way, “The use of video adds a dimension of persuasion that strengthens the impact on both the head and the heart.”⁴⁹ Doug Adams, in his forward to Michael Bausch’s book *Silver Screen Sacred Story*, observes that the use of audio visuals not only helps to reach a people accustomed to receiving information in such a way, it also deepens the connection between God and that world, “The importance of using visual arts in worship is about more than the language of worship, however. Just as Jesus used common bread and wine in the Last Supper so we effectively sacramentalize the connection between worship and the world by using popular visual images in our worship.”⁵⁰ Johnston takes a different approach on this connection between Word and world, “Multimedia preaching can help people develop discernment toward the images that shape both thinking and values.”⁵¹

Finally, the use of the electronic culture in worship can reach out to those who learn better through their eyes than through their ears. As we shall see in Chapter Six on

⁴⁸ Johnston, 164.

⁴⁹ Wayne Schmidt, “The Value of Video: Why Adding Multimedia To Your Sermon May Be Worth The Effort” *Leadership*, Vol. 20, Sp. ’99, 46.

⁵⁰ Doug Adams, in foreword to Michael Busch’s *Silver Screen Sacred Story: Using Multimedia in Worship* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2002), p. v.

⁵¹ Johnston, 165.

Learning Styles, not all people learn in the same way, and most people actually use a variety of ways to learn. Wayne Schmidt refers to this when he says, “By utilizing the video screen, I also reach a larger percentage of people who are visual learners.”⁵²

Certainly it seems to be true that in their worship, many churches frequently use the electronic culture, to use Sample’s term. This practice is not without its critics, many of them vehement and eloquent. In response to the argument that the use of the electronic culture is necessary because the postmodern culture swims in the waters of technology, William Willimon argues, “We must be reminded that *the gospel is a culture*. . . . Rather than reaching out to speak to our culture, our time as preachers is better spent inculturating modern, late-twentieth century Americans into that culture called *church*.”⁵³ He goes on to say, “The point is not to speak to the culture. The point is to change it.”⁵⁴ Dawn says much the same thing, “If the Church’s worship is faithful, it will eventually be subversive of the culture surrounding it, for God’s truth transforms the lives of those nurtured by it.”⁵⁵

A quarter of a century ago, Fred Craddock recognized the ways in which television was moving society towards visual communication and yet he argued for the importance of the word, “In the opinion of some, the success of the Christian proclamation depends upon the church’s ability to make the transition so men can *see*. Against such a view, however, it should be kept in mind that the Bible favors the ear over the eye in attempting to present its message about God who communicates.”⁵⁶ Writing more recently, Dawn asks, “If television is causing people to be dissatisfied with the

⁵² Schmidt, 45.

⁵³ William Willimon, “This Culture is Overrated” *Leadership*, W ’97 Vol. 18, 30.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Dawn, 57.

⁵⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*. 3d ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 1979, 9.

worship of our churches, should we change worship to be more like television – or should the splendor of our worship cause people to ask better questions about television?”⁵⁷ The Word of God and human words are still critical elements of worship. Craddock argues, “Preaching is incarnational: as the Word came in the flesh, so the Word comes in the form of human speech.”⁵⁸

Craig Larson suggests that high-tech worship is not all it is cracked up to be, even in reaching younger people. He quotes his twenty-year-old son, “When I’m flipping the channels on television, I notice something quicker if it has entertainment value, but I’ll lose interest after I get past the initial ‘Here, watch this! Information that is presented in a low tech way interests me more because it’s not fake.’” Larson concludes, “Many listeners in search of truth find low tech more credible. The significance of the subject is what makes mere words appealing.”⁵⁹

For a generation who longs above all for genuineness and real connections, Larson’s critique is compelling. For all their familiarity with the electronic culture, such people may long for and respond best to plain speaking and simple worship.

Such critiques call us to think carefully and respond intentionally and wisely to the possibilities of the electronic culture. Criticism of the use of images in worship in any form is not new, as we saw in Chapter Three regarding both icons and stained glass. Likewise, struggles over the use of new technologies are a longstanding tradition within Christianity. Susan J. White tells us, “To a certain extent, then, men and women in every age have had to integrate technology into their personal and communal perspective, and

⁵⁷ Marva Dawn, *A Royal “Waste” of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Erdmann’s Publishing Co.), 1999. 73.

⁵⁸ Craddock, 46.

⁵⁹ Craig Larson, “The Power of Mere Words” *Leadership*, W ’97, Vol. 18, 34.

to manage the social, moral, and intellectual anxieties that the relationship with technology occasions.”⁶⁰ As Christians have done over the centuries in response to new technologies, from the printing press to pipe organs, we must learn to incorporate technology without falling prey to its temptations to idolatry. Let us look at some of the ways churches are using technology in their worship and as we do so, keep in mind the basic question throughout this dissertation: can the use of this particular form of visual symbol help people to encounter God?

The electronic culture can be used in worship in a variety of capacities. Software programs such as Microsoft’s PowerPoint or other programs can be used to enhance a sermon. Michael Bausch observes, “During a sermon it is possible to display the sermon outline, as well as colorful charts, maps, photographs, paintings, sculptures, scripture references, or a short segment from a popular movie.”⁶¹ Ginghamburg Church, in a Real Video presentation of one of their worship services on Money Matters, used visual enhancements during the sermon. This included repeated screens showing the theme statement for the day, an outline of the sermon, verses of Scripture on a background of an open Bible, and a short video the church had made of a parishioner talking about how his own faith impacted his financial management.⁶² Even in a large church, this personal portrayal of a real person talking about real issues brought the message to life and made it seem down to earth and genuine. Wayne Schmidt reports about video clips, “Those we’ve created ourselves make the most lasting impact.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Susan J. White, 15.

⁶¹ Bausch, 9.

⁶² www.Ginghamburg.org, Real Video for Nov. 15-16, 2003, Tipp City, OH, accessed Nov. 23, 2003.

⁶³ Schmidt, 44.

The use of movie clips within worship often takes place as a sermon illustration. For years, preachers have referred to movies or TV shows as illustrations. Now they can show the actual clip rather than just describing it. Movie clips can also be used earlier in the service to lay out the theme for the day. For example, Ginghamburg Church did a service using the theme “Traveling Companions.” The service began with a jazz band playing “Somewhere Over The Rainbow” and then moved on to a video clip from “The Wizard of Oz.”⁶⁴ The visual appeal has the potential to immediately capture people’s attention and then hold it for the entire service.

Another use of electronic culture is to enhance the musical portions of a service. For example, some churches use a multimedia approach to the singing of songs. Those churches that have the staff to do this sometimes produce their own productions complete with pictures and words to songs which will be sung either by a praise team, a choir, or the congregation. Churches without the staffing to produce their own may use purchased productions. One example is Integrity’s iWORSHIP DVD which combines photographs of people and nature with the words and music to songs, such as “Shout To the Lord” or “All Hail The Power of Jesus’ Name.”⁶⁵ Instead of the old bouncing ball technique to follow along in singing the words, the words themselves come on the screen in highly graphic and engaging forms as the music in the background comes to the appropriate spot. Michael Bausch suggests, “Other parts of the worship service can be visually

⁶⁴ Kim Miller & The Ginghamburg Church Worship Team, *Handbook For Multi-Sensory Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 121.

⁶⁵ Integrity’s iWORSHIP: A Total Worship Experience DVD Vol. A, Set 1 (Mobile, AL: Integrity Music, Inc.,) 2003.

enhanced with displays of words to hymns, prayers, and announcements, as well as pictures to serve as a backdrop to the words.”⁶⁶

Videos can also be presented as mission stories or illustrations of the church’s own ministries.⁶⁷ Michael Bausch suggests this is often the best way to introduce the use of multimedia into the worship service, “A way to illustrate some part of worship in a manner acceptable to most everyone in a congregation is to develop a short program recognizing a confirmation group or the recent high-school graduates.”⁶⁸

As with any use of visual symbols in worship, the use of the electronic culture presents both possibilities and liabilities. Schmidt warns against illustrations that distract, technical difficulties, and material that offends such as movie clips using profanity, violence, or sex.⁶⁹ An article in *Interpreter* magazine says that one thing that makes worship sink is multitasking, “Don’t try to do too much in one service: don’t cram too many programs or theme days into one Sunday.”⁷⁰ The same could be said, of course, of anything else in worship: too many banners, hymns, prayers, scriptures, or sermons can distract, confuse, and distort people’s abilities to encounter God. Within appropriate parameters, some unique to the use of the electronic culture and some not so different from those applied to any other media used in worship, it seems that high technology or the electronic culture can help some people to encounter God in their worship.

⁶⁶ Bausch, 9.

⁶⁷ My own church, the Monroe United Methodist Church, recently included multimedia in worship for the first time showing a youth group activity, using a borrowed projector and a digital video camera.

⁶⁸ Bausch, 54.

⁶⁹ Schmidt, 45 and 46.

⁷⁰ Ray Waddle, “Worship Now!” *Interpreter*, Vol. 47, No. 6, Sept. 2003, 16.

Other Occasional Symbols

The vast majority of uses of the electronic culture will be occasional in that the same movie clip will not be used week to week, nor will the PowerPoint presentation accompanying the praise choruses be used many times in a row. In addition to the electronic culture, there are a variety of other types of visual symbols that can also be used occasionally, from object lessons for Children's Moments to objects used as illustrations in the sermon itself, to flower and other altar arrangements. Here we will briefly explore a few of these uses and samples of the types of objects.

In *Creating Visual Imagery in Worship*, Rosemary Brown presents a number of ideas for altar arrangements that illustrate the theme for the service. She comments, "In our experience of worship, hymns often 'dangle,' the call to worship may be completely unrelated to the text, and the altar area usually remains the same in appearance (except for an Easter lily or a Christmas poinsettia) all year round."⁷¹ She offers suggestions for visual symbols to be used as altar arrangements along with a theme, setting, text, ideas to develop, and a proposed order of worship including calls to worship, prayers, and sermon titles. For example, for a service based on the theme of roots, she suggests roots of varying kinds accompanied by candles and statues of forebears in the faith. In addition to these, members of the worshipping community may be invited to bring forward pictures of loved ones who have modeled faith for them.

Robert Webber describes the impact a Passion Collage atop a communion table had on him as he worshipped. The collage included an earthenware water pot, a crown of thorns, a money bag, a bowl of grapes, a chalice, bread, a pitcher for wine, a basin for footwashing, stalks of wheat, and palm branches. Webber says, "Here I was on the

⁷¹ Rosemary Brown, *Creating Visual Imagery In Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1986), 5.

second Sunday of Lent, a long way from home and among a thousand people I did not know. But there in front of me were all the visual symbols that unite black and white, male and female, children and seniors, liturgical and nonliturgical people. Before my eyes, the entire Passion was brought to me, and I encountered Jesus.”⁷² Visual symbols helped him to meet with God.

Innovative Worship: 95 Easy Worship-Enhancing Ideas, provides suggestions of every day items to use in worship. A sample service is based on Psalm 42 with a theme statement, “Just as a deer depends on water to survive, we depend on God. Those who seek God will be satisfied.”⁷³ The visual symbol, which in this case also incorporates other senses, is to distribute small packets of saltine crackers and bottles of water. Worshippers are to eat the saltines as they read together the verse from the Psalm and then they receive the bottle of water as they leave worship.

Suggestions like those above are far from high tech, yet they can indeed enhance worship. David Archer says, “Visual aids can provide a focus for thoughts which easily wander and can reinforce the theme of the worship.”⁷⁴ While the use of the electronic culture as described in the above section can be a great addition to worship, simpler, lower tech visual symbols can also assist people in encountering God. The further advantage of such low tech options is that they are possible in worship spaces which make use of the electronic culture difficult if not impossible and they are usually available at little or no cost. Robert Webber’s story tells us, quite plainly, that visual symbols can effectively and powerfully, draw a person into God’s presence.

⁷² Webber, *Blended Worship*, 102.

⁷³ Dennis R. McLaughlin, ed., *Innovative Worship: 95 Easy Worship-Enhancing Ideas* (Loveland, CO, Vital Ministry Books, 1999), 67.

⁷⁴ Archer, 9.

Conclusion

We have seen that there are many ways in which churches today use visual symbols to enhance their worship: various forms of liturgical art, seasonal symbols, permanent symbols including the architecture of a building, the electronic culture, and occasional symbols. We have shown that, while such symbols do carry some risk of misuse, from sheer entertainment to idolatry to an artificial feel to a service, each of these forms of visual symbols does also have the potential to draw people into an encounter with God. Robert Webber says of the arts, and I would add of various types of visual symbols:

The concept of the arts now, as in the days of the early church, is rooted in an understanding of the implications of the Incarnation . . . A theology of the incarnation says that God, the immaterial one became present in this world in a material and tangible way. What this means for the arts is that the divine chooses to become present through creation, through wood, stone, mortar, color, shape, sound, form, movement and action.⁷⁵

As those who worship an Incarnate God, Christians encounter God by means of the material, tangible, and visible. Visual symbols have great potential to be aids to worship.

We have now established that according to the Biblical record, God permitted and even commanded the use of visual symbols within worship. In addition, we have shown that visual symbols have been used throughout the history of Christian worship ranging from the use of icons in the Orthodox Church to the central role played by the altar, especially though not solely for Roman Catholics, and the light shed by stained glass windows for both Roman Catholics and Protestants. We have seen that visual symbols play a variety of roles within the contemporary church including both seasonal and

⁷⁵ Webber, *Blended Worship: Achieving Substance and Relevance in Worship*, 104.

permanent symbols as well as the new possibilities offered by the use of electronic symbols. Throughout our exploration of the use of symbols, we have also seen that objections have been raised, from those centered around the decrees of the second commandment to an emphasis on reason over participation in mystery as the focus on worship to recent complaints that electronic symbols are a concession to secular culture rather than the conversion of that culture. We have also seen that a clear understanding of worship is necessary in order to fairly evaluate how and if visual symbols should be used. Finally, we have seen that the use of visual symbols is appropriate when grounded in the Incarnation of Jesus. We move, therefore, to an exploration of the theology of the incarnation.

CHAPTER FIVE

INCARNATIONAL THEOLOGY AND THE USE OF VISUAL SYMBOLS AS AIDS TO WORSHIP

We have reflected on information from the Bible, history, and contemporary worship regarding the use of visual symbols as aids to worship. Let us now reflect on what incarnational theology tells us about our topic. We will begin by looking at the Biblical roots of such a theology, and then move on to hear some other theological reflections on the Incarnation. We will show that incarnational theology calls for worshippers to use creation and material objects in such a way that these objects become ways of praising God. Visual symbols used to praise God can be aids to worship.

Definition of Incarnation

As we move now to consider incarnational theology, let us briefly define what we mean by Incarnation, a classic Christian doctrine but not a word found in the Bible itself. Different authors use the word in slightly different ways. C. Stephen Evans, in his book *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, says of what he calls the incarnational narrative: “It is not a story about a mere human being but an account of Jesus as the Son of God, a unique, divine person.”¹ James D. G. Dunn says “‘Incarnation’ means initially that God’s love and power had been experienced in fullest measure in, through and as this man Jesus, that Christ had been experienced as God’s self expression, the Christ-event as the effective, re-creative power of God.”² Georgia Harkness puts it simply, “The

¹ C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and The Jesus of Faith* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2.

² James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of The Incarnation* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1980), 262.

Christian doctrine of the ‘incarnation’ means that in Jesus we see God ‘in the flesh.’”³

Speaking of Incarnation, Norman Pittenger notes, “Jesus, then is truly human; he is truly divine.”⁴ D.M. Bailie speaks of the Incarnation as the central paradox, “How can the same life be explained as a completely human life in the continuum of history and as the life of God Himself?”⁵

Many other scholars could be quoted here, but let these five suffice. Each of them makes some reference to Incarnation as meaning that Jesus was both human and divine. That is the definition of Incarnation I wish to use for our purposes: that Jesus Christ was fully human and fully divine.

Biblical Roots To An Incarnational Theology

Let us now move further into the Bible, specifically the New Testament, to ask what are the Biblical roots of an incarnational theology? Any number of texts could be cited as sources of an incarnational theology. Space does not permit a definitive study of every possible text. Therefore, I want to highlight a few of the primary texts which emerged in my research.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us,” says John 1:14 (NRSV). Here is the crux of Incarnation. As we saw in the discussion of the tent of meeting, the word translated here as “lived” means, in Greek, to “tent or encamp.”⁶ This text, more clearly than any other, connects the Old Testament image of God dwelling in the people’s midst with the New Testament understanding of Jesus.

³ Georgia Harkness, *Understanding the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, MSMXLVII), 66.

⁴ W. Norman Pittenger, *Christ and Christian Faith: Some Presuppositions and Implications of the Incarnation* (New York, NY: Round Table Press, Inc., 1941), 66.

⁵ D.M. Bailie, *God Was In Christ* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1948), 110.

⁶ Strong's, *Greek Dictionary of the New Testament*, 65.

Especially appropriate to our study of visual images is the meaning of the word used here for flesh. The Greek word is *sarx* the first definition of which, according to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, is "flesh (as *stripped* of the skin)"⁷ Raymond Brown says, "The Prologue does not say that the Word entered into flesh or abided in flesh but that the Word *became* flesh. Therefore, instead of supplying the liberation from the material world that the Greek mind yearned for, the Word of God was now inextricably bound to human history."⁸ Berquist notes, "Jesus is God incarnate, the very embodiment of God in ways that are visible, so that we may behold God's glory, grace, and truth. . . . John's gospel echoes the images of Ezekiel and other prophets, envisioning a God whose dwelling place is nearby and whose house is close at hand. In Jesus, God resides with us."⁹

John's use of the Word or Logos in this passage is usually taken to refer to the pre-existent Christ who was then made Incarnate in the man Jesus. Harry Austryn Wolfson says, "The pre-existent Christ is thus described as having been made 'in the likeness of man' or as having been found 'in fashion as a man.' Jesus would thus consist of a Logos and man."¹⁰

This passage lays out for us then, not simply a visual image but the actual visible presence of God. God took on the material stuff of human existence, in Pittenger's words, "in the human life which came into the world through the conception by Blessed Mary, humanity at its best, most integrated, most truly human, is the adequate vehicle and

⁷ Ibid., 64

⁸ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John, i-xii* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 31.

⁹ Jon Berquist, *Incarnation* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1999), 83.

¹⁰ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers: Faith, Trinity, Incarnation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 364.

instrument for God's purposes and activities among men. Humanity is here the perfected means whereby God's act is done in the sphere of human affairs."¹¹

Another text which serves as a root of incarnational theology is Hebrews 1:3, "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." The word used for reflection, *apaugasma*, according to Alexander Purdy, "can mean either the radiation or the reflection of the glory of God. The latter is more probable, since the writer has turned from the Son's creative role to his nature."¹² The word translated imprint, *charakter*, says Purdy, "*means the impression of a seal left on wax or clay.*"¹³ Both are unique to the New Testament and point to Christ's Incarnation. Purdy continues, "In these two words our author emphasizes the Son's oneness with God without ever quite identifying him with God. He is the outgoing of God into the world, which he sustains by his word of power. He bears the express image of God and reflects his glory."¹⁴ Thomas G. Long says of this verse, "Jesus, as the Son, is not an approximation of divine truth; in him the very nature of God shines forth brilliantly. Jesus is not *a* word from God, he is *the* divine word."¹⁵ Here again we see God in a visual way. Purdy says, "In these opening verses he binds creation and redemption indissolubly together."¹⁶ George Carey notes, "Indeed, he is creator and preserver (Hebrews 1:2, 3) and reflects the 'effulgence' of God's glory."¹⁷

¹¹ Pittenger, 67.

¹² Alexander C. Purdy, *The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 11* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, George Arthur Buttrick, ed. 1955), 601.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Purdy, 601.

¹⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Interpretation: Hebrews* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997), 15.

¹⁶ Purdy, 602.

¹⁷ George Carey, *God Incarnate: Meeting the Contemporary Challenges To a Classic Christian Doctrine* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 37.

This text from Hebrews points to the human being, Jesus, as revealing the divinity of God. Long says, “To paraphrase Paul, in former times, God’s people may have seen ‘through a glass darkly,’ but in Jesus, we see God ‘face to face.’”¹⁸ Jesus had a face, he could be seen, and in the seeing, the glory of God was accessible to human beings. Long refers to reformer John Calvin, “‘The Father, however infinite, becomes finite in the Son.’”¹⁹ Again, this holds before us the sense that in Jesus God took on the limited stuff of earthly life; he was made finite. God’s glory is known, at least according to this passage, through the human face of Jesus. The spiritual is revealed via the material.

I Timothy 3:16b is likely from an early Christian hymn, “He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory” (NRSV). James D.G. Dunn says, “The six lines cited are one of the clearest examples of an early Christian hymn.”²⁰ Anthony Hanson sees in this verse two contrasting lines, “The contrast lies in the fact that one deals with Jesus in the earthly sphere, the other with Jesus in the heavenly (or spiritual) sphere.”²¹ Here too Incarnation becomes apparent in the linkage of human or earthly and divine or heavenly. It is in the earthly, the flesh, that God was revealed. The material became a means by which the spiritual became known.

Another early Christian hymn, Philippians 2:6-8, develops this same theme with different words, “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being

¹⁸ Long, 15.

¹⁹ Ibid. Long does not footnote the Calvin reference so I am unable to give an original source here.

²⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *The New Interpreter's Bible: The First and Second Letters To Timothy and the Letter To Titus*, Ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 808.

²¹ Anthony Tyrell Hanson, *Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible: The Pastoral Letters* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 46.

born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.” The Greek word translated here as ‘form’ is *morphe*. Morna Hooker says, “The basic meaning of the word . . . is ‘visible form.’”²² In Jesus God could be seen.

Kenneth Grayston suggests, “All the phrases for his slavery, humiliation and obedience mean that he willingly accepted the human condition of powerlessness and mortality.”²³ Hooker says this part of the hymn deals, “with Christ’s voluntary humiliation.”²⁴ In Jesus, God took on flesh. Hooker finds a similar theme in other passages, such as 2 Corinthians 8:9 and Galatians 4:4-7 and says, “All these passages describe what we may term incarnation, and in all three, the result of Christ’s becoming man is that human beings are made what he eternally is.”²⁵

As we have seen in the previous texts, this hymn from Philippians holds before us the belief that in Jesus, God was made Incarnate, and that meant that in Jesus God was made available to human beings in a visible way.

As Hooker noted above, a similar theme is found in other texts, including Galatians 4:4-5, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” It is particularly the phrase “born of a woman,” which interests us here for it points to Jesus’ humanity. Regarding this text, William Neil says, “Yet this divine, pre-existent Son was *born of a woman*, that is, entered into our

²² Morna D. Hooker, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: The Letter to The Philippians* Ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 507.

²³ Kenneth Grayston, *Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible: The Letters of Paul to the Philippians and to the Thessalonians* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 27.

²⁴ Hooker, 501.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 504.

human situation as one of ourselves. This is a common biblical expression denoting ordinary manhood.”²⁶ Hans Dieter Betz says of the theological underpinnings to this section of this text, “This Christology emphasizes Christ’s existence as a human being, in particular his being a Jew . . . the statement is not even one of Christology, but of anthropology: it is a definition of human life.”²⁷ Here again we see that God worked through the ordinary. The greatest theophany of all came, not through bolts of lightening, mysterious secrets, or unnatural phenomena, but via a human being, an ordinary human being born in the usual fashion, of a woman. Betz says, “This anthropological definition is given a Christological purpose, indicating that Christ’s appearance was that of a human being in the full sense of the term.”²⁸ Ordinary things, even human beings, can have spiritual purposes.

Each of these five texts points in some way then to Jesus as human and divine. The divine took on material stuff. The Gospels develop for us the details of that humanity. Jesus was born as a human baby, he grew in wisdom and in stature, he hungered and thirsted, he slept, he died. Other New Testament texts, such as Philippians 2:9-11 and Colossians 1:15-20, among others, expand on the theme of his divinity. I am not going to look more closely at those passages here, but simply recognize that the Bible contains material about both the humanity and the divinity of Jesus. Incarnation is indeed a concept firmly rooted in the Bible. Note that of the five texts we examined here, at least two are early Christian hymns which scholars believe predate the actual penning of the epistles themselves. This belief that God took on the flesh of a human being, coming

²⁶ William Neil, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible: The Letter of Paul to the Galatians* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 15.

²⁷ Hans Dieter Betz, *A Commentary of Paul’s Letter To The Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), 207.

²⁸ Betz, 208.

among us as one of us, was a core belief of Christianity from its earliest days, and is clearly reflected in the New Testament.

An Incarnational Theology

Many theologians and preachers have written, preached, and reflected on the Incarnation of Jesus. We briefly surveyed a few of them earlier as we explored definitions of Incarnation. Here we will look at the reasons for, and implications of, the Incarnation.

Charles Spurgeon preached regarding Jesus' Incarnation, "When the Lord became bone of our bone, and flesh of our flesh, His incarnation in a human body brought Him far nearer to man than when He only abode within curtains, and occupied a tent in the midst of Israel."²⁹ As he says, it was this Incarnation that brought God closer to us than anything else. In taking on human flesh, God became one of us. It was the ultimate act of solidarity.

Louis Cassels observes that the Incarnation was not only a way for God to share the plight of humankind, it was a way for humankind to understand more about God, "What the Incarnation actually affirms is that the man Jesus of Nazareth, who was known to his disciples as a fully human person, sharing the limitations and temptations of ordinary men, was also in a unique sense the self expression of God."³⁰ John Macquarrie makes much the same point, "To claim that in Jesus 'the Word became flesh' is to assert

²⁹ C.H. Spurgeon, "The True Tabernacle and Its Glory of Grace and Peace," *Sermon 1862*. Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington. September 27, 1885.

³⁰ Louis Cassels, *Christian Primer: Adult Answers to Basic Questions About the Christian Faith* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 16.

that in and through this particular being, Being has found signal expression.”³¹ The Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ revealed who God is to human beings.

The text from Galatians, discussed above, states the purpose of the Incarnation, “In order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” Betz says, “The purpose and goal of Christ’s coming into the world was the redemption of both Jews and Gentiles.”³² From this, one might infer, as many have done, that the Incarnation was God’s response to the fallenness of humankind.

In a lovely little parable, Cassel’s connects God’s act of solidarity with humankind with God’s response to human sin:

Once upon a time, there was a man who looked upon Christmas as a lot of humbug.

He wasn’t a Scrooge. He was a very kind and decent person, generous to his family, upright in all of his dealings with other men.

But he didn’t believe all that stuff about an Incarnation which churches proclaim at Christmas. And he was too honest to pretend that he did.

‘I am truly sorry to distress you,’ he told his wife, who was a faithful churchgoer. ‘But I simply cannot understand this claim that God became man. It doesn’t make any sense to me.’

On Christmas Eve, his wife and children went to church for the midnight service. He declined to accompany them.

‘I’d feel like a hypocrite,’ he explained. ‘I’d much rather stay at home. But I’ll wait up for you.’

Shortly after his family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window and watched the flurries getting heavier and heavier.

‘If we must have Christmas,’ he reflected, ‘it’s nice to have a white one.’

He went back to his chair by the fireside and began to read his newspaper.

A few minutes later, he was startled by a thudding sound. It was quickly followed by another, then another. He thought that someone must be throwing snowballs at his living-room window.

³¹ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966), 294.

³² Betz, 208.

When he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter had tried to fly through his window

‘I can’t let these poor creatures lie there and freeze,’ he thought. ‘But how can I help them?’

Then he remembered the barn where the children’s pony was stabled. It would provide a warm shelter. He quickly put on his coat and galoshes and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the doors wide and turned on a light.

But the birds didn’t come in.

‘Food will bring them in,’ he thought. So he hurried back to the house for bread crumbs, which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail into the barn.

To his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow.

He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around and waving his arms. They scattered in every direction – except into the warm, lighted barn.

‘They find me a strange and terrifying creature,’ he said to himself, ‘and I can’t seem to think of any way to let them know they can trust me.’

‘If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety.’

Just at that moment, the church bells began to ring.

He stood silently for a while, listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas.

Then he sank to his knees in the snow.

‘Now I do understand,’ he whispered. ‘Now I see why You had to do it.’³³

As this parable conveys, by becoming one of us, God was able to lead humankind to salvation in a way that nothing else God had tried managed to do. Sinful, fallen humanity could not find its way to safety on its own. Prophets, patriarchs and matriarchs, could not reach that fallen humanity with God’s salvation. Commandments and prophecies made little impact. Ultimately, God had to take on human form in order to fully communicate with us the true nature of the salvation available to us.

Not everyone has understood the Incarnation solely as a response to human sin, however. Another way of understanding the Incarnation is that it reveals an essential part

³³ Cassels, 18-20.

of God's nature, namely that it is in the very essence of God to so identify with God's creation, that one day God would inevitably become one with that creation. In this understanding, the Incarnation of Jesus was not God's Plan B, devised after human sin became apparent in Adam's fall in the Garden of Eden, but God's Plan A, part of the original intentions of God. Kallistos Ware, an Orthodox scholar, notes, "St. Isaac urges, God's taking of our humanity is to be understood not only as an act of restoration, not only as a response to man's sin, but also and more fundamentally as an act of love, an expression of God's own nature. Even had there been no fall, God in his limitless, outgoing love would still have chosen to identify himself with his creation by becoming man."³⁴

Ware gives us an insight into the theological implications of Incarnation. Incarnation reveals basic truths about who God is: God's love is such that God chooses solidarity with God's creation. That much is true even for those who see the Incarnation as God's response to human sin, as well as for those who insist God would have chosen Incarnation had sin never entered the picture. Incarnation also reveals a basic truth about the creation: creation can and does reveal God to us, though it is well to state up front that creation is not the same thing as God. Ware cautions, "As creator, then, God is always at the heart of each thing, maintaining it in being But while present everywhere in the world, God is not to be identified with the world. As Christians we affirm not pantheism but 'panentheism.' God is *in* all things yet also *beyond and above*

³⁴ Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1979), 93.

all things.”³⁵ An incarnational theology affirms God’s presence in the world even as it affirms that God is far more than the world.

Earlier, in Chapter Three as we explored the use of icons, we mentioned briefly the patristic formula, “God became man that man might become God.” The Orthodox Church sees in this statement the doctrine of theosis, or union between God and humans. The Incarnation is summed up in the first half of Athanasius’ formula, “God became man.” Kenneth Paul Wesche says, “The term *theosis* or *deification* summarizes the second half of the formula to signify the soteriological consequence of the incarnation for humanity and the world: This is the possibility to attain union with God.”³⁶ Wesche sees theosis as based in the Incarnation, “It is rooted in the Christ, himself a mystery of transformation. For, in his Incarnation, the divine Logos changes without changing; he *becomes* flesh without ceasing to be *who* he is.”³⁷ Theosis is another implication of the Incarnation, for if in the person of Jesus, the Christ was transformed – became human – so in Christ we too can be transformed – become God or like God. Baggley sees this union touching not just people and God but all of creation, “The mystery of the Incarnation which unites God and man, and brings together heaven and earth, is seen as drawing a joyful response from the whole creation, as the created order welcomes and seeks to co-operate with the self-emptying love of God.”³⁸ God’s presence in the world and the world’s joyful response to God cannot be set apart from each other.

God’s presence in the world emphasizes for us the essential connection between the material and the spiritual. Richard Eslinger says, “In the beginning was *logos*, and

³⁵ Ware, 58.

³⁶ Kenneth Paul Wesche, “Eastern Orthodox Spirituality: Union With God in Theosis” *Theology Today* Vol. 56, Is. 1, Ap. ’99. 29.

³⁷ Ibid., 30.

³⁸ Baggley, *Festival Icons*. 34.

much of Scripture is the story of the consequences of the utterance of that divine Word. And yet the image maintains an essential presence as well: humanity is created by the Word as *imago Dei*, and in the incarnation of the Word we *see* the glory of the Father.”³⁹ Ware says, “In ‘spiritualizing’ the body, man does not thereby dematerialize it: on the contrary, it is the human vocation to manifest the spiritual *in and through the material*. Christians are in this sense the only true materialists.”⁴⁰ Christian materialism, to coin a phrase, calls us to consider the ways in which the material does indeed manifest the spiritual, with the Incarnation as the primary model. Ware shows us some ways this can happen, “In a variety of ways – through the cultivation of the earth, through craftsmanship, through the writing of books and the painting of ikons – man gives material things a voice and renders the creation articulate in praise of God.”⁴¹ Christian materialism turns to the material, not for personal pleasure or satisfaction, but in order better to worship. We see this in Scripture. In taking on human flesh, the Incarnation of Jesus both revealed God’s solidarity with God’s creation and at the same time gave glory to God. After telling how Jesus was born in human likeness, the hymn referred to above from Philippians, goes on to say, “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11, NRSV).

³⁹ Richard L. Eslinger, *Intersections: Post-critical Studies in Preaching* ed. Richard L. Eslinger (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann’s, Publishing Co., 1994), 80.

⁴⁰ Ware, 64.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

It was through Incarnation, through taking on of the material, that every knee in heaven and earth was led to worship, that is to bend and confess Christ as Lord. The goal of the use of the material by Christians is to articulate God's praise.

Conclusion

This leads us back to our original topic: the role of visual symbols as aids to worship. We have shown that the doctrine of the Incarnation is firmly rooted in the Bible. In the person of Jesus, God took on human flesh so that it was possible to see God in a visual way. Because of the Incarnation of Jesus the spiritual was revealed via the material.

We have also shown that the Incarnation not only helped humans to understand more of who God is, it also was the ultimate act of solidarity on God's behalf. God chose to become one with God's creation through the Incarnation of Jesus so that the Incarnation was an act of love.

We have shown that the Incarnation reveals to us the essential connection between the material and the spiritual. Rather than being separated off into different spheres, the material and the spiritual are linked together in the Incarnation of Jesus. The ultimate goal of the material then is to articulate God's praise.

In Chapter One we showed that worship is defined as an encounter with God which leads to our response. Praise is certainly an appropriate response to such an encounter. Therefore, we can see that visual symbols are appropriate aids to worship for they can help worshippers to praise God.

CHAPTER SIX

LEARNING STYLES AND VISUAL SYMBOLS

In this chapter we move away from religious or spiritual teachings and practices to the realm of education and learning theory. As a part of this, we will look briefly at brain structure and development and then at two models of learning styles. Our purpose in doing this is to examine the ways in which different learning styles can apply to different approaches to worship. While prayer and worship are not the same thing as learning, the ways in which people learn may be similar to the ways in which they experience the world in general, including the ways in which they encounter God. We will show that one way in which people learn is that of visual/spatial intelligence and therefore that the use of the visual as aids to worship may speak in particular ways to those people.

Brain Development and Structure

To understand the ways in which people think and experience the world around them, it is helpful to have some basic understanding of brain structure. Our purpose here is not to become brain surgeons nor to be fully conversant with brain anatomy, but to understand just enough about the brain to understand the ways in which the brain responds to visual stimuli.

David A. Hogue gives a simple explanation of the brain. He notes, “The visible outside of the brain is called the cortex, or more commonly the *neocortex* It is the seat of most of our higher cognitive functions, including logic, problem solving, intuitive

psychology, and our sense of the passage of time.”¹ Adding to this description of the brain, Jane M. Healy tells us that the cortex, “Consists of two distinct halves – the cerebral hemispheres. These two hard-working teammates contain two sets of cortical lobes which gradually develop specialized abilities for seeing, hearing, feeling, and thinking intelligently.”² Hogue notes, “Each hemisphere is divided into four sections or lobes, each of which plays critical roles in particular dimensions of mental life.”³ Because our purpose is to understand how the brain responds to visual stimuli and not to do a thorough study of the entire brain, we will look only at those parts of the brain that have to do with processing visual information. The parietal lobe, as Hogue notes, “Nestled comfortably in between the other three lobes, plays critical roles in pulling together or associating input from those sources. Among other functions, damage to the parietal lobes of the brain can interfere with the brain’s ability to orient itself in space. Recognizing faces is also supported by the right parietal lobe.”⁴ It is the parietal lobe that responds to visual stimuli in worship, be that a banner, a stained glass window, or a movie clip.

Also relevant to our discussion of how visual stimuli are processed by the brain is an understanding of differences in the two hemispheres of the brain. Healy tells us, “Each hemisphere has its own unique style of processing information. For most people the right hemisphere learns by looking, and getting the whole intuitive ‘feel’ of a situation, while the left tends to listen and analyze systematically. The right sees outlines

¹ David A. Hogue, *Remembering The Future, Imagine the Past: Story, Ritual, and the Human Brain* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 30.

² Jane M. Healy, *Your Child's Growing Mind: A Guide to Learning and Brain Development From Birth to Adolescence* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1987), 126.

³ Hogue, 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

and wholes, while the left arranges the details in order.”⁵ Hogue describes the differences in this way, “The left brain by its very nature constructs stories to make sense of what’s happening in the world. . . . The right brain, by contrast, is more aware of specific details and is much less likely to mistake one event or object for another.”⁶ This understanding of the two hemispheres of the brain has led to discussion of right brained versus left brained learners. Healy says, “*Hemispheric dominance* is one side’s tendency to determine the style of processing to be used for a job.”⁷

Before we go too far with a discussion of hemispheric differences, however, Hogue tells us, “Linking the two half brains together, is a band of several million neurons, collectively known as the *corpus callosum*.”⁸ Healy observes, “With the exception of a few surgical cases . . . it isn’t possible to be ‘left-brained’ or ‘right-brained,’ Even after surgery the brain fights for normalcy.”⁹ Along the same lines, Hogue says, “Neuroscientists are concluding that complex systems of neurons are responsible for our most critical human capacities rather than locating responsibility for any important capacity solely in one area of the brain.”¹⁰

It may be useful for us to look at the ways in which the right brain is more apt to process visual information but always we do well to remember that the whole brain is involved in any such activity. With the rare exception of a few people whose brains have been damaged by injury, illness, or surgery, most people will use both sides of their brains to process information and respond to situations. At the same time, it does seem

⁵ Healy, 129.

⁶ Hogue, 85.

⁷ Healy, 136.

⁸ Hogue, 32.

⁹ Healy, 126.

¹⁰ Hogue, 83.

that many people have a tendency to prefer one style over another. Healy observes, “Children differ in the way they deploy thinking skills.”¹¹ She goes on: “*Hemispheric style* is used to suggest an individual’s preferred way of processing information when there is a choice of strategy to be used. . . . Although both hemispheres are working, one may set the tone.”¹²

Two Cognitive Styles

With this basic information about the brain, we can move on then to discuss cognitive style. Richard Riding and Stephen Rayner give us this definition, “Cognitive style is seen as an individual’s preferred and habitual approach to organising and representing information.”¹³ In surveying the literature on this subject, they go on to note, “Riding and Cheema (1991) found over 30 labels and, after reviewing the descriptions, correlations between them, methods of assessment, and effect on behavior, concluded that they could be grouped into two principal cognitive style dimensions: the wholistic-analytic and the verbal-imagery style dimensions.”¹⁴ Developing these two dimensions, these authors distinguish between them in this way, “The wholistic-analytic style dimension of whether an individual tends to *organise* information into wholes or parts The verbal-imagery style dimension of whether an individual is inclined to *represent* information during thinking verbally or in mental pictures.”¹⁵ Healy touches on these distinctions when she talks about hemispheric differences, “For most people the

¹¹ Healy, 136.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Richard Riding and Stephen Rayner, *Cognitive Style and Learning Strategies: Understanding Style Differences in Learning and Behavior* (London, UK: David Fulton Publishers, Ltd., 1999), 8.

¹⁴ Riding and Rayner, 8.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

right hemisphere learns by looking, and getting the whole intuitive ‘feel’ of a situation, while the left tends to listen and analyze systematically. The right sees outlines and wholes, while the left arranges the details in order. The right is a *simultaneous* ‘lumper,’ the left, a *sequential* ‘splitter.’”¹⁶ Howard Gardener speaks of these differences in this way, “In the area of brain study, there have been the *localizers* who believe that different portions of the nervous system mediate diverse intellectual capacities: and these localizers have been arrayed against the holists, who deem major intellectual functions to be the property of the brain as a whole.”¹⁷

As they discuss the two dimensions of learning described above, Riding and Rayner conclude, “While individuals obviously have the capacity to use either mode of representation, and will do so from time to time, there exists a marked tendency to consistently use one rather than the other, and this signifies in the individual a particular orientation or ‘style.’”¹⁸ In support of this, Riding and Rayner refer to a study done by Riding and Ashmore in 1980 in which seventy-four eleven-year-old pupils were assessed as either verbalisers or imagers by a Code Test. They were then presented with either a textual or a pictorial version of the same information, “They found that verbalisers were superior with the verbal version and imagers when learning in the pictorial mode.”¹⁹

Using these distinctions, we can see that some people will prefer to receive and organize information by dividing it up into parts – a more left-brained approach, while others will see it as a whole – a more right-brained approach. Those who divide it up into parts are also more likely to prefer a verbal approach while those who see it as a whole

¹⁶ Healy, 129.

¹⁷ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1983), 7.

¹⁸ Riding and Rayner, 39.

¹⁹ Ibid., 148.

will prefer imagery. As we saw above, those who prefer a right-brained approach will tend towards emphasizing the visual. Thus, while we must be cautious about making hard and fast distinctions, it does seem that there will be a certain category of people who will find visual symbolism to be especially helpful. If this is true for people as they learn a new piece of information then we can also apply that same truth to the way in which people encounter God. For right-brained, wholistic thinkers who appreciate imagery, visual symbols may also be powerful aids to worship. Abbot Suger, putting himself into the scene depicted in a stained glass window, may well have been a right-brained thinker. Andre Rublev, writing an icon through which he prayed, may also have been such a right-brained thinker. Obviously neither of these men was limited to only right-brained thinking or praying, but that may well have been their preferred style.

Multiple Intelligences

The concept of cognitive styles has led to that of learning styles. Of relevance to our discussion is Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner suggests that intelligence is not one unified capability, nor two cognitive styles. In contrast to the two categories of localizers and holistic learners, he says, "I argue that there is persuasive evidence for the existence of several *relatively autonomous* human intellectual competances, abbreviated hereafter as 'human intelligences.'"²⁰ Gardener broaches this theory with caution:

The exact nature and breadth of each intellectual 'frame' has not so far been satisfactorily established, nor has the precise number of intelligences been fixed. But the conviction that there exist at least some intelligences, that these are relatively independent of one another, and that they can be

²⁰ Gardener, 8.

fashioned and combined in a multiplicity of adaptive ways by individuals and cultures, seems to me to be increasingly difficult to deny.²¹

In support of this theory, Gardner draws on the field of neurology:

We find, from recent work in neurology, increasingly persuasive evidence for functional units in the nervous systems. There are units subserving microscopic abilities in the individual columns of the sensory or frontal areas; and there are much larger units, visible to inspection, which serve more complex and molar human functions, like linguistic or spatial processing. These suggest a biological basis for specialized intelligences.²²

Twenty years after Gardner first proposed his theory, Debra Viadero has said of

Gardner's work:

Some evidence supportive of his theory, nonetheless is dribbling in from neuroscience, where researchers are using newer brain-imaging technology to study the neural pathways that are activated in the brain when people undertake different kinds of activities. Some of those studies suggest that language, musical abilities, the ability to use movement, and mathematical abilities may indeed operate through separate neural systems.²³

To fully understand Gardner's theory, we must look at what he means by an intelligence. He defines it in this way:

To my mind, a human intellectual competence must entail a set of skills of problem solving – enabling the individual *to resolve genuine problems or difficulties* that he or she encounters and, when appropriate, to create an effective product – and must also entail the potential for *finding or creating problems* – thereby laying the groundwork for the acquisition of new knowledge.²⁴

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gardner, 57.

²³ Debra Viadero, "Staying Power" *Education Week*. June 4, 2003, Vol. 22, Issue 39, 4.

²⁴ Gardner, 60.

Gardner suggests then at least seven intelligences: verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, bodily/kinesthetic, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal.²⁵

As we consider our question of how visual symbols can be aids to worship, let us reflect on worship's role in solving a problem. I doubt that most worship planners consider worship in terms of how it solves a problem, but for our purposes it is a useful question. How does worship solve the problem of helping people to encounter and respond to God? Gardner is insistent that his listing of seven intelligences is not definitive, "I am confident that if there are seven intelligences, there must be more; and I am sure . . . that each of these intelligences has subcomponents as well."²⁶ Even so, it seems unlikely that Gardner would classify worship as an intelligence itself, and indeed, that is not our proposal here. However, if the problem is to commune with God, then the theory of multiple intelligences suggests that there may be a variety of ways to solve the problem of communing with God, which is the goal of worship. Gardner's proposal of at least seven intelligences would suggest that each of them could be a skill used in solving that problem. For our purposes, visual/spatial intelligence is most relevant, but it is important to note that it is not the only one.

Speaking specifically then of spatial intelligence, Gardner says:

Central to spatial intelligence are the capacities to perceive the visual world accurately, to perform transformations and modifications upon one's initial perceptions, and to be able to re-create aspects of one's visual experience, even in the absence of relevant physical stimuli. One can be

²⁵ David Lazear, *Seven Ways of Knowing: Teaching for Multiple Intelligences*, Second Edition. (Palatine, IL: Skylight Publications, 1991), xi-xiv.

²⁶ Howard Gardner, foreword to *Seven Ways of Knowing: Teaching for Multiple Intelligences*, second edition. (Palatine, IL: Skylight Publishing, 1991), vi.

asked to produce forms or simply to manipulate those that have been provided . . . spatial intelligence emerges as an amalgam of abilities.²⁷

The reader may have noted that this definition is of spatial intelligence, yet previously I have mentioned visual/spatial intelligence. Addressing this lack of clarity in terms, Gardner says:

From some points of view, it would be appropriate to propose the descriptor *visual* because, in normal human beings, spatial intelligence is closely tied to, and grows directly out of, one's observation of the visual world. . . . But just as linguistic intelligence is not wholly dependent upon the auditory-oral channels and can develop in an individual deprived of these modes of communication, so too, spatial intelligence can develop . . . even in an individual who is blind and therefore has no direct access to the visual world.²⁸

As mentioned above, some theorists propose a two-fold distinction of cognitive style, based on the verbal/imagery dimension, or whether people use language or mental images to process information. Gardner refers to this theory when he notes:

In the view of many, spatial intelligence is the "other intelligence" – the one that should be arrayed against, and be considered equal in importance to, "linguistic intelligence." Dualists speak of two systems of representation – a verbal code and an imagistic code; localizers place the linguistic code in the left hemisphere, the spatial code in the right hemisphere.²⁹

Gardner recognizes the importance of these two basic ways of approaching life, though he rejects limiting an understanding of intelligence to just the two ways, "I do not subscribe to such dichotomization of intellect. Still I would admit that, for most of the tasks used by experimental psychologists, linguistic and spatial intelligences provide the principal sources of storage and solution."³⁰

²⁷ Ibid., 173.

²⁸ Ibid., 174.

²⁹ Ibid., 177.

³⁰ Ibid.

It is not our purpose here to answer definitively the question of the number of intelligences, nor to understand the totality of even Gardner's theory. What is relevant for us is the understanding that spatial or visual intelligence is a significant way of processing information for a number of people. Neither Gardner nor Riding and Raynor offer a statistical analysis of the percentage of people who prefer one cognitive style or form of intelligence over another, so we cannot state how many people in a given congregation might use visual/spatial intelligence. We can, however, recognize that within any group of people there will be some who will prefer visual/spatial intelligence as a way of processing information, and others who will prefer other approaches.

David Lazear, develops Gardner's understanding of visual/spatial intelligence:

Visual/spatial intelligence deals with such things as the visual arts (including painting, drawing, and sculpture); navigation, map-making, and architecture (which involve the use of space and knowing how to get around in it); and games such as chess (which require the ability to visualize objects from different perspectives and angles). The key sensory base of this intelligence is the sense of sight, but also the ability to form images and pictures in the mind.³¹

Lazear goes on to note that, "Visual/spatial intelligence is triggered by presenting the mind with and/or creating unusual, delightful, and colorful designs, patterns, shapes, and pictures."³² Thus we can see that visual/spatial intelligence focuses around the use of visual objects and mental imagery. The tabernacle, the ark, and the temple for the Hebrew people were visible signs that helped them to understand God's presence among them. An icon conveys God's presence for an Orthodox Christian, or a stained glass window conveys the beauty and glory of God for a Christian in the West in visible ways. As we saw in Chapter Four, the electronic culture has increased the use of the visual.

³¹ Lazear, xii.

³² Ibid., 171.

Graham Johnston said, “Based on the sheer weight of a lifetime of screen watching, researchers now argue that postmodern folks’ brains actually process information differently.”³³ Such examples show us how, at least for some people, perhaps an increasing number, a visual object or sign helps them to commune with God.

Conclusion

We have shown that people process information in different ways. One theory about this is that some process information in parts and others in wholes, while another theory is that some process information through imagery and others through analysis. Gardner’s theory is that there are actually a number of intelligences. Anne Perry takes this from the world of education and neurobiology to the church when she says, “We are not monolithic people. Many personalities and levels of spiritual experience comprise a worshipping audience. What inspires some may be dullsville for others. The fact is that multiple intelligences make up each congregation.”³⁴ Having shown that there are many ways in which people process information in general and also in which they approach God, we have also shown that one of these ways, though not the only one by far, is that of the visual/spatial, or the use of imagery.

This has two implications for our discussion of visual symbols as aids to worship. The first is that for some people visual symbols may be especially meaningful. For those people who tend to prefer right brained thinking, who think in terms of images, or whose primary intelligence is that of visual/spatial, a visual symbol may help them to encounter God in ways left brained, verbal thinking or linguistic intelligence do not. To pray, for

³³ Johnston, 164.

³⁴ Anne Perry, “Windows on Worship” *Circuit Rider* Vol. 27, No 5., 9, Sept/Oct 2003.

example, before an icon or bathed in the light of a stained glass window may bring these people into the presence of God in especially powerful ways.

Such visual symbols will not have the same impact on all people. Those who prefer left brained thinking may find that the visual symbol is not as meaningful as the turn of a phrase in a sermon or a discussion in a Bible study. People who prefer musical/kinesthetic intelligence may find that liturgical dance or singing a song bring them into the presence of God more meaningfully than looking at a symbol, however beautiful. Our purpose is not to suggest that visual symbols are the only way to help people to pray or worship, but that they are one way which can speak in special ways to some people.

At the same time, whole brain thinking suggests that visual stimuli, and therefore visual symbols as aids to worship, have the potential to speak to all people. Gardner insists that it is inappropriate to dichotomize the various intelligences, “These intelligences are fictions – at most useful fictions – for discussion processes and abilities that (like all of life) are continuous with one another.”³⁵ Along the same lines, Roxana Moreno and Richard E. Mayer advocate the use of two modalities in teaching, “One of the most cited examples of modality effects in the literature is the superior recall for lists of items when they are presented in visual and auditory modalities rather than just in one modality.”³⁶ While visual symbols may not be the method of choice for those who prefer left brained thinking, there may be times when they will be helpful to them. The best of both worlds is when visual and auditory information supplement and enhance each other.

³⁵ Gardner, 70.

³⁶ Roxana Morena and Richard E. Mayer, “Cognitive Principles of Multimedia Learning: The Role of Modality and Contiguity, *Journal of Educational Psychology*. 1999, Vol. 91, No. 2, 359.

This opens up for us the possibility that visual symbols can be appropriate aids to worship for all people, while recognizing they will be more powerful for some than for others. It also encourages the finding of ways for visual symbols to be compatible with other aids to worship, be they auditory, kinesthetic, or interpersonal.

The first chapters in this dissertation established that the Bible does provide a place for the use of visual symbols as aids to worship and that they have been used over the history of the Christian Church, including in increasing ways in the contemporary church. An incarnational theology recognizes the use of the material as means to articulate God's praise. This chapter has shown us that some people will find visual symbols especially helpful. All that remains is for us to discover ways in which churches can make use of visual symbols in their worship. The final chapter will offer some practical applications for the use of visual symbols in worship.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE USE OF VISUAL SYMBOLS AS AIDS TO WORSHIP: PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Sermons Using Visual Symbols

Introduction

As we saw in Chapter Four on the use of visual symbols as aids to worship in the contemporary church, there is a wide variety of ways in which visual symbols can be used to aid people's encounter with God. Visual symbols can play a part in many aspects of a worship service. The story problem that began this dissertation raised the question of how best to incorporate visual symbols in older buildings. We have shown some examples of visual symbols that are actually more likely to be present in older buildings, such as stained glass windows, and some which may encounter difficulties in older buildings such as the use of the electronic culture. Thomas Long reports that vital worship is possible in older buildings, "All of the vital congregations observed for this book made creative use of their worship space, but only one of these congregations worship in a sanctuary built after 1970. The rest of them have all had to struggle with all of the usual constraints of older buildings."¹ Long goes on to describe in general terms some of the ways in which these churches made such creative use of their worship space, "For the most part they have not knocked down walls or built new wings. They have instead worked with light and color; they have cleared out clutter and placed a piece of furniture here rather than there; they have taken the structures they inherited and, through a hundred little modifications, allowed those buildings to support the dynamics of

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship* (Bethesda, MD: The Alban Institute, 2001), 66.

worship.”² Whatever the building is like, as we have shown, visual symbols can enhance worship.

In this section we will give examples of ways that visual symbols can accompany a sermon. Many contemporary churches are using computer generated graphics to give the eyes something to do while listening to a sermon and these can certainly be effective tools. Here we will look at visual symbols that do not use the electronic culture. One sermon will use a stained glass window which is a main visual feature of the sanctuary. The other will use visual aids that could be used in any setting. In both cases, the symbols themselves help to give structure to the sermon and in so doing support the dynamic of worship.

Where Are You In This Picture?

This sermon was preached on Palm Sunday, 2002 at the Toppenish United Methodist Church in Toppenish, Washington. At the start of the service, Matthew 21:1-11, the proclamation of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, was read. The congregation then processed to their seats waving palm fronds. The text for the sermon was Matthew 26:36-45. To the left of the chancel in this church is a large stained glass window depicting the Garden of Gethsemane. In the window, Jesus is kneeling at a rock. Behind him, one can see two much smaller figures and beyond them the outline of a city.

At the start of this service, I encouraged worshippers to sit where they could see the window clearly, explaining that we would be looking at it throughout the sermon. Many people moved so that the window was more visible to them.

² Long, 66.

Where Are You In This Picture?

Look at the Gethsemane window which is in back of the piano. Every Sunday we come to worship in this room, with this image of Jesus at prayer before us. If you are anything at all like me, there are days when you hardly give it a glance. Other times, especially when the sun shines through it, the window almost seems to come to life. Its colors are rich and full. Today I want us to focus on the Gethsemane window and the light it may shed on the story behind it.

Before we go into the Garden of Gethsemane, however, let's back up and review what happened before Jesus went to that garden. Earlier in the week, he had entered Jerusalem in triumph as the crowds waved palm branches and laid their cloaks before him, a procession we recalled in our own procession into worship earlier today. Once in Jerusalem, he had cleansed the Temple, taught in its courtyard, debated with the Pharisees, and predicted that he would be handed over to be crucified.

Just prior to going out to the garden, Jesus had eaten the Passover supper with his disciples. During that last meal together, he had told them, "one of you will betray me." According to the Passover traditions, Jesus had broken bread and shared a cup of wine with those eating with him. He had then done something not according to Passover traditions. After breaking the bread, he had said, "Take, eat, this is my body." Of the cup of wine he had said, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." You'll note that in our Gethsemane window the central panel of Jesus at prayer is flanked on either side by a sheaf of wheat and a cluster of grapes. They remind us that we gather to share communion in remembrance of Jesus, as he taught us to do.

After the last supper, Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him and then they went to the garden. According to the Gospels of both Matthew and Mark he told his disciples to, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." Then he took Peter, James, and John with him on into the garden. To these three he gave different instructions, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here and stay awake with me." Then Jesus went still further into the garden and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." As the old King James Version of the Bible, quoted on our window, puts it, "Not my will, but thine."

Jesus came to the disciples and found them sleeping, not keeping watch with him. The first time he said to Peter, "so, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Twice more Jesus went off and prayed. Twice more the disciples nodded off. This was their last time with Jesus, for this scene ends with Jesus' arrest. The disciples, at least the inner three, spent that time asleep.

Look up again at our window. Where are you in this scene? Are you way in the back, still in the city, shown with some buildings off in the distance? I know there are many times when that is where I am. I'm back in the Upper Room, washing the dishes from that supper. A souvenir palm frond is tucked in my belt, dried over the week, but reminding me of the glory of that day. I may even be humming "Hosanna" under my breath. I'm happy to have a task to do, a safe one without any emotional entanglements. I can stick with my happy memories and my hopes for the future. I'm out of the sun's heat, protected from the evening breezes. Where are you? Are you too back in the city?

Perhaps you are one of the nine disciples whom Jesus left at the entrance to the garden, sitting around, as Jesus told you. Those disciples are not shown in our window. I can see myself as one of them. We barely remember their names, we don't really know their stories. They weren't the real leaders, they didn't do much that was spectacular. I often prefer to be in the background, to be important enough to be included as one of Jesus' disciples but not so obvious that all my mistakes get broadcast, like Peter's did. "Sit here while I go over there and pray." I can do that. I'd be comfortable with this role. I'm in the story, but so far back that you can't see me in the picture. Where are you? Are you one of the nine?

The Bible tells us that Jesus took three disciples with him further into the garden. You will note that only two disciples are shown in our window. I'm not sure what happened to the third one. Maybe he is lying flat on the ground, the better to sleep. Maybe he is hidden by a tree. Maybe he has slipped away somewhere. Are you the missing disciple who has somehow disappeared from the picture? That could also be me at times. I was there for a while. I was one of the inner circle, but when the camera came out, I slipped away. I didn't really want all that attention and responsibility after all. Where are you? Have you stepped out of the picture?

Then again, you could be Peter, the dozing disciple. Peter: the one whose spirit is willing enough, but whose flesh is weak. I sympathize with Peter. He's just had a big meal. It had been a busy day. He may well have closed his eyes to pray and without ever intending to, nodded off to sleep. Some people drop off without the least encouragement. I once knew a woman who slept at basketball games, sitting on bleachers. She probably had sleep apnea and couldn't help it. Maybe Peter was like her.

I might be Peter, full of the best intentions, but not able to follow through on them. Where are you? Are you Peter, with a willing spirit but weak flesh?

Maybe, just maybe, you are Jesus. What a wonderful model this picture holds before us, as individuals and as a church. "Not my will, but thine." All churches have within them a few faithful people who spend their time in prayer, earnestly seeking to do God's will, even at great sacrifice. Notice how in our window, Jesus is looking up, as if to God, as a beam of light shines down onto him. It is almost as if he is back at the Mount of Transfiguration where his face shone like the sun and a bright cloud overshadowed him. Here too, Jesus' face glows. It also reminds me of Jesus' baptism when the heavens opened to him. On both of those occasions God's voice sounded, "This is my Son, the Beloved." Here too, Jesus is so close to God, so clearly God's Beloved, that he can pray, "Not my will, but thine."

None of us here are Jesus, of course. But are you with Jesus, praying for God's will to be done rather than your own will? Are you focusing your eyes on God, not on the acclaim of the crowd chanting, "Hosanna!", not on those rotten people behind you who have let you down again, not on your own needs and desires. Look at Jesus in this window. Let it be for you a window into eternity, a window into the future. Add yourself to the picture. See yourself, kneeling beside Jesus, praying along with him, "not my will but thine."

Where are you in this picture? Let us each add ourselves to it so that we are with Jesus.

In Chapter Three as we explored the role of stained glass windows as aids to worship, we noted that abbots of medieval communities had themselves portrayed as physically present in the scenes depicted in stained glass windows. Abbot Suger, for example, is shown prostrating himself before the Virgin Mary in an Annunciation panel in the cathedral at Saint-Denis. This sermon invites people to use their imaginations to do just what Abbot Suger did: to place themselves in the garden of Gethsemane. The use of the visual symbol of the stained glass window draws people into the presence of God by drawing them into the Biblical scene.

This sermon also demonstrates the way in which a permanent visual symbol can be incorporated into the worship service. At this service, at least, it would have been difficult for a worshipper to ignore or be unaware of this window. As one of, if not the, dominant visual symbols in this particular sanctuary, the Gethsemane window became, in a way, the sermon for this day. Not all stained glass windows will lend themselves to be used in this way, but many will.



In a church without such a window but with the capability to use the computer generated graphics, much the same thing could be accomplished by showing a photograph of such a scene. Computers would even allow for specific aspects of the picture to be highlighted at relevant parts of the sermon, focusing in, for example, on the city, the two disciples, or on Jesus.


Behold a Broken World

This sermon was preached on World Communion Sunday, 2003 at the Monroe United Methodist Church in Monroe, Washington. *The United Methodist Book of*

Worship describes the history of this day, “Observed on the first Sunday in October, this day calls the Church to be the universal, inclusive Church. The day was first observed by Presbyterians in 1936, adopted by the Federal Council of Churches in 1940, and shortly thereafter observed in Methodist and Evangelical United Brethren Churches.”³ The sermon preceded the celebration of Holy Communion. In this particular church, the communion table was covered with many types of bread including tortillas, round loaves, English muffins, rolls, etc. The texts for this service were Job 1:1; 2:1-10 and Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12.

In the text following, the following icons indicate when these symbols were elevated before the congregation: a small inflatable globe which was half deflated,

indicated in the text by:  ; a small brass cross, indicated in the text by:  ; and the

bread already on the communion table, indicated in the text by:  . The sermon was preached from the center of the chancel. Also present on the communion table was a globe on a small stand. This particular sanctuary contained a series of stained glass windows depicting scenes from the life of Christ, one of which is referred to in the sermon.

Behold A Broken World

Behold, a broken world.  *Last summer, temperatures soared, not just here in Monroe but around the world. In France, estimates are that fifteen thousand people*

³ *The United Methodist Book of Worship* #431

died due to the heat. Glaciers are melting on Mt. Rainer. Just a couple of weeks ago, the three-thousand- year-old Ward Hunt ice shelf broke off from Canada. We can debate global warming and its causes, but something seems to be going on. Pollution, over-population, and deforestation seem to be taking their toll.



Behold a broken world. Soldiers and civilians continue to die in Iraq. Afghanistan is in turmoil. Israel and Palestine are in the process of shredding the road map to peace. Car bombs rip apart UN headquarters in Iraq. The war on terrorism is far from over. None of us are sure when or where the next attack will take place, but we don't doubt that it will.



Behold a broken world. AIDS is ravaging Africa where as many as one third of children in some countries have been orphaned by this disease. In the US, diabetes is at epidemic rates, cancer and heart disease are rife, and children are being diagnosed at younger and younger ages with mental illnesses. Illness and disease haunt our lives and burden our souls.

Job knew all about a broken world. He lost his wealth, his children, and finally his health. He knew destruction, death, and ill health.



Behold, a broken world. Listen to the evening news or read the paper and you hear stories of crime, hatred, racism, violence. The world seems broken indeed by human sin.

It's not the way it was supposed to be. Read the first pages of the Bible and it seems an idyllic place, "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good." The Garden of Eden was a place of serenity and beauty, of harmony and delight.

The world as it is pictured in Genesis 1 seems whole and complete, not fractured like it is now.

The Book of Isaiah holds out a vision of harmony for the end of time, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid . . . They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.”

Psalms 8, quoted in our lesson today from Hebrews, marvels that human beings were made only, “a little lower than the angels.” It then goes on to note, “God has crowned them with glory and honor.” We were, after all, made in the image of God.

Yet the brokenness of our world testifies to the brokenness of humanity. We don’t act like we were made in the image of God. We appear to be crowned with dishonor and shame not glory and honor. So much for the original vision. So much for a whole and complete world.

Plan A didn’t work out very well – even for God. Remember that the next time your plans go awry. Think of it when your dreams of the perfect party or the top grade in the class fall to ruins.

Behold a broken world.



Behold a broken God.



In Jesus Christ, God came among us to share our woundedness, our frailty, even our death. Hebrews tells us, “we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels.” Jesus, lower than the angels? Just a chapter earlier, Hebrews told us of Jesus, “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the

exact imprint of God's very being." Jesus was fully divine. He shared 100% of God's glory and majesty, of God's perfection and beauty.

At the same time, this fully divine Jesus was made to be like us – a little lower than the angels. In Jesus, God became human. Jesus was 100% divine and Jesus was 100% human. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he came into a land occupied by a foreign power. He was born into a world filled with hunger and disease, violence and cruelty.



Behold a broken God. Someone once asked me if Jesus was ever sick. "The Bible doesn't say specifically," I answered, "but I would say yes." In words from Isaiah that Christians now understand to describe Jesus, we hear, "Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases." So I think it is reasonable to say that in Jesus God knew what it was like to be sick – just like us.

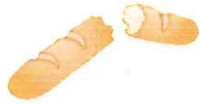


Behold a broken God. Our lesson from Hebrews says, "who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." Jesus' body was broken on the cross. Look at the stained glass window which shows Jesus on the cross. The nails in his feet and hands show clearly. The reality was likely far more gruesome. Jesus died.



Behold a broken God. Jesus died on the cross. It didn't just look like he died. It wasn't a faked death. He died. For real.

Behold broken bread. (Preacher now moves behind communion table).



Across this broken world, Christians gather today to remember a broken God who took a loaf of bread and gave thanks for it. He then broke the bread and said,

"This is my body, given for you."



Behold broken bread.



It is for us this day the broken body of our Lord. When we break the bread it becomes for us a sharing in the body of Christ as he came among us to share in our brokenness.



Behold broken bread.

We gather to share in this meal, in this sacred feast, because the Host, the Lord of Life has tasted death for us all and in so doing given us new life. When we share in this broken bread we become whole once again.



Note that this cross is empty. Jesus is no longer on it. He is no longer broken for he was raised from the dead. We become whole because God in Christ has forgiven us for our sins. We become whole because by sharing our broken lives Jesus brought us salvation – a word which at its root means wholeness and health.



Behold a broken world.

Behold a broken God.



Behold broken bread.



Behold, a world made whole. (Whole globe spun.) Thanks be to God.

The use of visual symbols in this sermon drew worshippers into the presence of God in several ways. The image of the broken world conveyed through a deflated globe confronted them with the ways in which their world is broken. Using an inflatable globe made it possible to actually punch it and so further emphasize the world's vulnerability and brokenness. In Chapter Four we noted that the cross is a primary symbol of the Christian faith. Elevating the cross, as well as referring to the crucifixion scene in the stained glass window, both emphasized Jesus' death on the cross and ultimately his resurrection. Finally, the elevation of the bread during the sermon mimicked the same action used in consecrating the bread during the communion service which followed soon after. Worshippers then ate from that same loaf of bread. Thus the visual symbols drew worshippers into their own brokenness and the wholeness made possible through faith in Jesus Christ.

The Worship Committee Studies Worship, Idolatry, and the Incarnation

We began this dissertation with a glimpse into a worship committee which was meeting to discuss ways to deepen the meaning in their worship service, while attempting to attract new, younger families. Let us close this dissertation by returning to that committee meeting. When we left the meeting, Pastor Sue had identified several issues facing the committee: how to help people encounter God in worship and whether visual symbols could aid such encounters, theological issues around the use of imagery in worship and the role played by the Incarnation, and finally the challenges faced by those congregations worshipping in older, buildings with traditional architecture and with limited budgets. Our Worship Committee is about to enter into a series of study sessions

led by Pastor Sue. The questions and activities she used for these sessions could be guides for other groups struggling with the meaning of worship and how idolatry and Incarnation inform that worship. These questions and activities will be printed below in *italics*.

Pastor Sue continued, “I wonder whether it would be helpful for us to take the time to seriously consider the definition of worship and the guidance given to us by the Bible, including what the second commandment means for us today,” she nodded to George as she said this, “as well as what Jesus’ Incarnation says about how we worship.” She looked around the room. Ryan was nodding in agreement, and even George looked interested. Pastor Sue asked: “I’d be willing to lead it if this committee would be willing to commit to study together.”

Lois looked around the room. “Well, what do you think?” she asked. Ryan said, “I think it is a good idea. I’m intrigued by what we’ve talked about tonight and would like to learn more. It would be worth another series of meetings.” Paula nodded, “If you can answer the question Father Timothy couldn’t, I would be delighted.” One by one the others agreed. “Adopted by consensus,” Lois stated. “See you again next week at this same time.”

The next week, Pastor Sue began: *“We will start by discussing the experience of worship itself. As we know, we all come from a variety of backgrounds, both regionally and denominationally. Some of us have lived in a number of places and a variety of areas. Some have participated in different churches while a few of us are quite new to the church. This all means that we have had very different experiences with worship. This first activity is intended to help us to reflect on own experiences of worship.”*

Pastor Sue passed out blank sheets of paper to each person. “I want you to record notes about a worship experience you’ve had which was highly meaningful. Notes should include, but not be limited to, the questions listed below. I’ll give you about five minutes of silence to make your notes, more if needed. If you wish, you are welcome to sketch answers to the questions when appropriate.”

- a. When was this service, what time of day did it take place, what time of the year was it?*
- b. Where was this service? Describe the setting – outdoors, indoors, any special features present in the worship setting?*
- c. Who was there?*
- d. What took place in this service? How were you involved in it?*

Once each member of the group had jotted some notes, Pastor Sue asked them to share their experiences. Ryan told about the day Liz was baptized and how listening to the pastor pour the water into the font had reminded him of the joyful sound of fountains bubbling in a courtyard and summed up the joy he and Meg had felt at Liz’s long awaited birth. Lois talked about a Christmas Eve service when people placed gifts in an empty manger. Barb’s most meaningful experience was an early morning worship service at camp when she was a youth with the sun just rising in the distance. Lisa shared about singing the Hallelujah Chorus at the end of an Easter service, George of meditating alone in silence, Paula of a Good Friday service when worshippers were asked to nail to a cross papers with their sins written on them, and Margaret of praying the Lord’s Prayer before communion.

Pastor Sue continued, *“Having discussed experiences of worship which have been meaningful for us, it is time to reflect on the definition of worship.”*

After asking Barb to read aloud Matthew 18:20, Pastor Sue asked the group to discuss: *What do you think it means for Jesus to be present when two or three gather? Can Jesus be present when a person is alone? How is Jesus’ presence different in solitary experiences, small group experiences, or large group experiences? Of the meaningful worship times shared in the first activity, how many people listed corporate experiences verses solitary experiences? Why is it important to gather in a group to worship?*

As they began their discussion, George commented, “You know, in a lot of ways I feel God’s presence more powerfully when I am meditating in private than I do at church with a bunch of other people, but this makes me realize that even for me it is important to be with them. “Yes,” Barb added. “My favorite part of the worship service is when we greet each other, and it is not just because I want to say hi to my friends. I feel like God is present when we are together.”

Pastor Sue said: *“Thanks for the segue, Barb. Now I’d like us to reflect on how we have encountered the presence of God in worship. Refer back to the meaningful worship experiences shared in the first activity. Was encounter with God part of those experiences? Have you ever had times when you have not encountered God in worship? When an encounter with God was disturbing, frightening, or unwelcome?”*

Lois asked, “Why would people not want an encounter with God?”

“I understand,” answered Margaret. “Sometimes God gets downright meddlesome in my life. When Pastor Sue preached about praying for our enemies right

after September 11, I did not want to hear that message. I was disturbed by that service. I knew she was right, but that didn't mean I wanted to hear it."

Ryan entered into the discussion. "That's true, Margaret. The other side is those days when I sit in church and think about the ball game – I don't experience God much at those times. Or other times when I fall asleep during the sermon – sorry Pastor Sue – or find everything so routine that it is boring. Maybe it is just me, but quite frankly, that happens to me a lot. That's why I came to that first meeting. I want something more, but I don't quite know how to describe it. An encounter with God gets as close as anything I can say."

"And, sad to say, I am sure you are not the only one, Ryan," said Pastor Sue, "which is exactly why we need to work at this as a team. It is helpful for us to think about the things that hinder us from experiencing God's presence, and also about the things that help us to experience God's presence. Probably the most important thing to remember is that is precisely the goal of worship – to help people to encounter God when they come here, even if it is meddlesome."

"Now I want to divide you into teams again," Pastor Sue stated. "I'm going to give each team a couple of questions about worship to discuss and some resources to look at. Work with them for about twenty minutes and then report back." Pastor Sue pointed to some papers on the table containing definitions of worship from pages 9-11 and then wrote on the board:

- a. Do we invite God into our worship or does God invite us?*
- b. Who is worship for? Who is worship about?*
- c. In what ways do we respond to God in worship?*

The group's discussion ranged far and wide, until finally George noted that time was up. Ryan left thinking about how worship was a lot more than he'd ever thought about it being. He could hardly wait for the next session to come, even though it meant he'd miss a great ball game.

Pastor Sue began: *"As Christians, we look to the Bible for a lot of guidance on life in general, and worship is certainly no different. Tonight we're going to take a look at the ways in which the tabernacle, the ark of the covenant, and the temple were a part of the Hebrew people's worship. I'm going to divide you into three groups and ask you to look up some passages. As a group, look for what your passage says about worship. How are people in this passage encountering God? What helps them to do so? What hinders them? How do they understand God? What role does the tabernacle, ark, or temple play in that worship? I've put some Bible study resources out on the table for you to use, but look at the Bible passages themselves first."* With this introduction, she wrote on the board: *"Tabernacle, Exodus 25:1-8; 33:7-11; 40:34-38. Ark of the Covenant, Deuteronomy 10:1-5; Numbers 10:33-36; Joshua 3:14-17. Temple, I Kings 6:11-13; 8:22-30; Psalm 122.*

After each group had studied their passages, they reported to the larger group what they had found. By the time they were done, the evening was over. "Next week, we get to George and Paula's questions," Pastor Sue promised.

Before the third meeting even began, George had his Bible turned to Exodus 20, and Pastor Sue asked the rest of the group to turn there as well. "George, would you please read Exodus 20:1-6," she requested. Then she asked the group: "Is this one commandment or two?" After a brief discussion, she asked the group to turn to Isaiah

42:17 and Jeremiah 10:3-9. *“What are the prophets saying about how the people are acting?” she questioned, guiding the committee into a discussion of the prophet’s criticisms of idol worship, with the following questions: “What were the idols they worshipped and why? What was the point of worshipping the idols? Why worship those idols and not God?”* Pastor Sue then presented the information found on pages 32-35.

“Take out a piece of paper,” Pastor Sue instructed, “and jot down on it any ways in which you think that people today worship idols.” After each person had followed these instructions, Pastor Sue asked, “Are the idols today graven images?”

As Ryan walked to the door at the end of the session, Paula said, “Sue thanks for this discussion. It is the first time I’ve understood that in worshipping idols, the Hebrew people were trying to control God.”

“I have to admit,” George added, “that people can be guilty of idolatry without ever using a graven image. I still like plainness and simplicity in worship, but I’m starting to think in some new ways.”

As the committee gathered for their fourth session, Pastor Sue said, *“Now I want us to dig into the Incarnation of Jesus.* Ryan raised his hand. “Pastor Sue, this is where you lost me back at that first planning meeting. I don’t know what that word means.”

“Good point, Ryan.” Pastor Sue said, “Thanks for asking. *The first thing we are going to do is to define the word. Will you help us start by reading John 1:14? After Ryan found the verse in the Bible she provided, she asked “So, what does it mean by ‘the Word? What about flesh?’* Some discussion followed, and then Barb said, “The footnote in my Bible says that God’s glory tabernacled in Jesus. Is that like the tabernacle we studied a couple of weeks ago?”

“Bingo!” Pastor Sue replied. “Who remembers about that tabernacle?”

Lisa chimed in, “The tabernacle showed that God lived among the Hebrews.”

George took a deep breath. “And this verse is saying that God lived among us in Jesus in the flesh. That would mean that Jesus was God in the flesh.”

“You’re getting there, George.” Pastor Sue answered him. *“Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. That is what Incarnation means. Let’s look at some other verses which talk about this.” She wrote on the white board: Hebrews 1:3; Philippians 2:6-8; I Timothy 3:16b; Galatians 4:4-5. “I’m going to divide you into two groups and give each group two of these passages to study. Read them and talk together about what they say about Jesus as being human and what they say about Jesus being divine.”*

George led off the report back from his team. “I don’t think it ever fully registered with me that in Jesus, God used the material stuff of human existence to convey a spiritual truth. Wow! That says to me that God blessed creation so that it can reveal spiritual things.”

“What it says to me, George,” responded Lisa, “is that while earthly things can be misused so that they are idolatrous, they can also be used to help us encounter God.”

“Yes,” said Lois. “Maybe we need to think about the ways we use or misuse things in our church. Back at that first meeting, George, I think you were the one who talked about not coming to worship to be entertained. I guess that would be a misuse of things.”

“Or banners just up for decoration, to look pretty,” said Paula, who had made several of the church’s banners.

“But if the banners, or the stained glass, or whatever, help to tell the story of Jesus or call us into God’s presence, then they are wonderful aids to worship.” Ryan added. “Or movie clips even, if only we could figure out a way to work that out in our building. But it seems to me that while that would be a great addition to our worship, used in the right way, there are a lot of other ways that we can use objects, especially visual ones, to help us all to encounter God, even in this old building. I really liked the time you used that globe and the cross and stuff throughout your sermon, Pastor Sue.”

“I always said adults got the lesson in object lessons in Children’s Moments better than the children ever did,” laughed Pastor Sue. “But you’re right, Ryan. There are a lot of ways we can use visual symbols to aid us in our worship. Some are always with us, like the stained glass windows. Others we use at certain times of the year, like advent wreaths in December and palms on Palm Sunday. The question for us now is can we make better use of the symbols we already have, and can we create new visual symbols.”

“I think we better learn how to,” answered Lois. “But that sounds like an on-going task for this group. Perhaps we should add visual symbols to the agenda for every meeting.”

Ryan left the last study session feeling excited and hopeful. “Encountering God would be even better than the ball game,” he thought as he climbed into his car. “Meg will be astonished.”

Conclusion

At the end of the story which introduced this dissertation, we identified several questions which summed up a need facing the church. What is the place of the material in

worship? Are visual symbols idolatrous, simply decoration or entertainment, or can they be aids to worship? How can small churches, on limited budgets and with traditional architecture, make the best use of visual symbols? In the process of answering these questions, we explored a number of topics.

In Chapter One, we defined worship as encountering God. We have shown that in the Incarnation of Jesus God came to humankind as one of us, and in God's taking on human flesh, humans encountered God in new and powerful ways. Jesus' Incarnation led to worship, from the shepherds who glorified God for their glimpse of the infant Jesus in the manger, to Mary Magdalene's attempts to cling to the resurrected Christ. In Chapter Two, we examined the use of visual objects, such as the tent of meeting, the ark of the covenant, and the temple, as aids to Hebrew worship. We recognized the danger of idolatry inherent in the use of visual symbols. In Chapter Three, we looked at the ways in which visual symbols have been used in Christian worship, from icons to altars to stained glass windows and a variety of other things, and saw that, while concerns about idolatry have been raised, such symbols have often been meaningful and significant aids to worship. In Chapter Four, we saw the many ways in which visual symbols are used today as aids to worship, from banners to movie clips, and verified that they are still helpful and often necessary aids to worship. In Chapter Five, we have shown that an incarnational theology calls for the use of the material (which will include, but not be limited to, the visual) as one means by which people can and perhaps even should worship. In Chapter Six, we saw that one of the ways some people process information is through the use of imagery or visual/spatial intelligence. In this final Chapter, we have presented two sermons using visual symbols as examples of ways in which such symbols

can be used in worship. We also followed a worship committee as they explored some of these topics.

The various ways in which these chapters have explored the topic of the use of visual symbols as aids to worship have answered our preliminary questions. We have shown that the place of the material in worship is rooted in the Incarnation. In Jesus of Nazareth, the divine took on the material and in response human beings have been led to worship. The place of the material in worship is to articulate God's praise. We have also seen that visual symbols do have the potential to be misused so that they become idolatrous, or simply for their decorative or entertainment value. At the same time they can be valuable aids to worship when they are used with the goal of aiding worshippers in articulating God's praise. Finally, while congregations with generous budgets and/or newer buildings equipped with the latest technology often make great use of visual symbols, smaller churches with traditional architecture and limited budgets can still make use of visual symbols. Video technology and computer generated graphics are certainly one way to use such visual symbols but as the attached sermons indicate, other options also exist.

God, who is present in creation, can indeed be encountered through that same creation. People, who are part of that creation, can respond to the presence of God in creation by means of creation. The encounter and the response are both essential aspects to worship. The use of the material – and therefore of visual symbols – is essential within worship itself.

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