

**VISUALS IN WORSHIP – HOW DO WE SEE GOD?**  
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More Churches Using Contemporary Worship Styles  
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A growing number of churches nationwide are holding contemporary worship services and utilizing modern technology. According to the latest study by Ellison Research of Phoenix, the greatest increases in contemporary worship styles have been in the proportion of congregations using video clips and graphic presentations such as PowerPoint. Released earlier this month, the survey of 659 senior pastors of Protestant churches asked whether the overall style of worship in their church had changed in the last five years. Fifteen percent said their worship has become much more contemporary, and another 36 percent said it had become a little more contemporary. The study also explored specific worship elements or styles churches use today, compared to what was used five years ago. In 1999, only 5 percent used PowerPoint or similar computer graphics presentations, but today the technology is used by 36 percent of all churches. Additionally, just 4 percent of the churches surveyed used video clips during worship services five years ago. Today, that is up to 29 percent. Three other elements increased by more than 50 percent over the past five years, including use of praise and worship choruses during worship, the use of Christian rock, pop or country and the use of drama skits or sketches.

**I. Introduction – Why Talk about Visuals in Worship?**

- A. We are increasingly a culture of images.
  - 1. Generations raised on 8 hours of TV a day.
  - 2. Advertising has fewer facts and more pictures.
  - 3. Which is more common – what book have you read or what movie did you see?
  - 4. TV, movies, videos, computer games, have all contributed to what one author has termed as “the rise of the image.”
  
- B. Some believe the church needs to make better use of visuals available to us.

Twenty-first century North Americans expect to be enveloped at concerts, entertainment venues, restaurants, (just ask any parent about Chucky Cheese’s) and even in their worship services. Whether the tools are low-tech candles, incense and mini-bells or high-tech video systems, intelligent lights and hazers, today’s churchgoer accepts and even expects simultaneous sensory input. (“Maximum Impact,” article in Worship Leader magazine Fall 2003)

Sally Morgenthaler foresees a day when digital video will be used as frequently and naturally in worship services as the hymnal ever was.

1. Statues and other icons – stationary images.
2. Banners, pictures, and other artistic works.
3. Projection based images on powerpoint or video – moving or stationary images

C. The question is how do we worship a God who is completely other yet has chosen to make himself known? What part do our eyes play in the worship of God? How do we SEE God?

1. Not a new question.
2. Religious visual art flourished in the middle ages. Gregory the Great (6<sup>th</sup> century) called religious art the “Bible of the poor.”
3. The Nicean Council of 787 AD addressed the subject of icons and affirmed that they were a type of the form that the invisible God took in the incarnation. They also approved the kissing of icons.
4. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Luther thought that “external images, parables, and signs are good and useful: they illustrate a thing so that it can be grasped and retained...The attention of the common man is aroused by illustrations and examples more readily than profound disputations...He prefers a painted picture to a well-written book.”
5. However, Calvin, Zwingli, and other Reformers resisted the use of images and religious art in response to the rampant abuse then present in the Catholic church. Calvin wrote in his Institutes: “Any use of images leads to idolatry. Adoration promptly follows upon this sort of fancy: for when men thought they gazed upon God in images, they also worshipped Him in them.”
6. The Puritans were known for iconoclasm, going so far as to remove images from cathedrals and churches.
7. The debate continues today with the introduction of technology which enables easy access to visuals of all kinds.
8. An issue that will always confront us.

## II. What do we mean by “worship?”

- A. Ask class for definitions.
- B. Giving honor to God in His presence through Christ according to His word. (Lawrence Roff)
- C. Exaltation of God

I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the humble hear and be

glad. Oh, magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together!  
(Ps. 34:1-3 ESV)

D. Encounter with God's Presence

*Ps. 100:1 Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! 2 Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!*

E. Response to God

Rom. 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

### III. Reasons given for benefits of using visuals

A. Visuals go beyond what words can communicate.

“Visual worship is...made up of symbols that can transcend language and cultural barriers. Regardless of their language and background, people can understand that these things bring glory to God.” (from iWorship promotional article)

B. Visuals are more relevant to our culture.

1. Len Wilson in “The Wired Church” writes: the projection screen “is the stained glass, and the cross, for the electronic media age...constantly transposing new imagery before us. Icons were the Bible for the illiterate, and the screen is the bible for the post-literate. (p. 41)
2. There’s no doubt that visual worship is the wave of the future, but it’s also worship music that goes far beyond the song list, and it stands to become a totally new worship experience perfect for people who are hungry for something new. It can speak to us—and all for whom the message of the Gospel was intended—on a level that we can all understand. (J. Gary Walker, *Beyond the Music*, Internet article 5/2/03)

C. Involves more of the senses.

1. Assumed value of “multi-sensory” worship.

God has created us to be sensual beings – we see, smell, taste, touch, and hear. By adding visual elements to worship, we engage more of what God has created us to be. Jesus himself gave visual examples of the kingdom of heaven, which his disciples could conceptually understand. (Banners Above Internet ad)

2. A didactic, linear approach in worship is a “way to deliver a concept.” A sensory, multimedia approach, in contrast, “invites you into the Grand Story.” (Sally Morgenthaler)
3. Fails to appreciate the priority of the mind in discerning truth.

#### IV. Concerns when using visuals

- A. Inherent in every technological change that brings good are unintended negative effects.
- B. While our culture is image-saturated, we are image-ignorant when it comes to understanding how and what images communicate.
  1. Difference between transmitting a message and actually communicating.
  2. Viewers assign different meanings to images.

Mother and child playing – joy or sadness?  
Mountains – God’s creation or vacation plans?  
Clouds – holiness, Jesus returning, or rain coming?
  3. The good news is that a picture is worth a thousand words. The bad news is that the viewer decides on which words.
  4. Difficult to communicate objective truths like holiness, atonement, sacrifice, and mercy.
- C. Idolatry - making a graven image

*Ex. 20:4 “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

1. The command has to do not so much with visuals, as with the worship of them.
2. However, consistent use of images to aid in the worship of God easily leads to a dependence on those images.

*Hab. 2:18 “What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols!*

*John 4:23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. 24 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”*

3. With visuals we are always a few steps from seducing people away from the Christian religion of faith in God's Word toward a pagan religion of sight and subjectivism.

In the practice of the arts, idolatry is subtle. It can creep in whenever we place artistic action between us and the Lord as if it **mediates** his presence or substitutes for the work and power of the Spirit. (Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship*, p. 214)

D. Overdependence on technology and art

1. False sense of community from watching a picture. We have only shared an experience, not our lives.
2. What we win people with is what we tend to win them to.
3. We should never feel as though we need to be computer geeks or technological powerhouses to lead people into a true encounter with God in congregational worship.

*1Cor. 2:1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*

E. Minimizing or relativizing the supreme place of God's Word

1. Visuals can tempt us to seek to control the response of the congregation with something other than the truth.
2. We “see” God through faith in the finished work of Christ.

*Heb. 11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*

*Heb. 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith,*

*with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*

3. Pictures don't change hearts – the Holy Spirit does.
4. Visuals aren't objects of faith – the Savior is.
5. Pictures don't make the truth "clearer," only more impacting.

Even though it is true that every kind of nonverbal expression possesses uniqueness, it is likewise true that no form of nonverbal expression can do what words can do. A jazz riff can no more articulate a methodology for day trading than a Bach fugue can explain substitutionary atonement. So every form of non-verbal expression, instead of going beyond what words can do, simply goes its own way, just as words go their way in doing what no other form of expression can do. And since truth is the most important thing that we can articulate, and since words are a better vehicle for this than any other existing form of expression, the word remains preeminent among all other forms. (Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship*, p. 193)

F. Begs the question – should we use visuals at all?

1. When understood properly and used thoughtfully, visuals can serve to promote true worship of God.

*Rom. 1:19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.*

2. God gifted Bezalel and Oholiab with knowledge and craftsmanship to design and make beautiful furnishings and garments for the tabernacle. (Ex. 31:1-5)

*Ex. 31:1 The LORD said to Moses, 2 "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, 3 and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, 4 to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, 5 in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft.*

## V. Using Visuals Wisely

- A. Know what ends you are seeking to accomplish with the means of visuals.
  - 1. Visuals should help us think more clearly about the truth, not less clearly.  
  
EX Valley of Vision video
  - 2. Visuals must serve the greater ends of worship in spirit and truth, fellowship, and impact of God's Word on our lives.
  - 3. If we are trying to compete with the world we'll lose either way.
  
- B. Introduce new visuals carefully, led by the pastor.
  - 1. Visuals are meant to be a medium for the message of God's Word, not the message itself.
  - 2. Use of visuals should be overseen and guided by the leaders of the church.  
  
Illus. Creative team
  
- C. Instruct the congregation.
  - 1. Avoid confusion by helping people understand how and why visuals are being used.
  - 2. We are not simply trying to keep up with the world.
  
- D. Take time to train people in any new technology.
  - 1. Don't underestimate the time it takes to prepare, or the number of people who might be needed.
  - 2. Train them to see their role as serving for God's glory.
  
- E. Keep learning, evaluating, and improving without losing sight of the main thing – cherishing and proclaiming all God is for us in Christ.
  - 1. Complementary over distracting.
  - 2. Clear over confusing.
  - 3. Thoughtful over careless.
  
- F. Don't use visuals to achieve what they aren't meant to achieve.

Yes, new technologies are part of the unfolding of God's original creation, *but* we fallen human beings will never be able to use them to usher in heaven on earth." (Quentin Schultze, *High Tech Worship?*, p. 43)

1. New visuals can't overcome old traditionalism – “the dead faith of the living.”
2. Visuals can't create true spiritual vitality.

Beautiful aesthetic surroundings will not generate God-centered worship, but the worshipping heart can take wings in a beautiful setting...Art with the proper attitude can be a great expression; but I must begin with a heart in fellowship with God. (Ronald Allen & Gordon Borrer, *Worship: Rediscovering the Missing Jewel*, p. 24)

G. Pursue creativity over predictability.

1. Colors
2. Plants and flowers
3. Banners
4. Candles
5. Arrangement of furniture
6. Don't forget the value of old visuals.

H. Consider how money for visuals might be better invested to serve the goals of worship, fellowship, discipleship, and evangelism.

It's often more fun to prepare a PowerPoint presentation than a sermon. But the result can be a dazzling presentation of drivel. (Don Whitney)