

The Use of Screens in the Sanctuary during Divine Service

A Report of the IDE Worship Committee

The use of digital devices, such as smart screens or power point systems, for the visual enhancement of worship has become a controversial subject. Some regard this technology as God's gift and vital to the survival of the twenty-first century church, others as a tool of the devil. While we do not wish to endorse either of these extreme viewpoints, we do regard it necessary to place this issue in perspective and survey the possible benefits and challenges involved.

As was stated in the introduction to Lutheran Worship:

Our Lord speaks and we listen. His Word bestows what it says. Faith that is born from what is heard acknowledges the gifts received with eager thankfulness and praise. Music is drawn into this thankfulness and praise, enlarging and elevating the adoration of our gracious giver God.

Saying back to Him what He has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is His Name, which He put upon us with the water of our Baptism. We are His. This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service.

Where His Name is, there He is. Before Him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness. His forgiveness is given us, and we, freed and forgiven, acclaim Him as our great and gracious God as we apply to ourselves the words He has used to make Himself known to us.

The rhythm of our worship is from Him to us, and then from us back to Him. He gives His gifts, and together we receive and extol them. We build one another up as we speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Our Lord gives us His body to eat and His blood to drink. Finally His blessing moves us out into our calling, where His gifts have their fruition. How best to do this we may learn from His Word and from the way His Word has prompted His worship through the centuries. We are heirs of an astonishingly rich tradition. Each generation receives from those who went before and, in making that tradition of the Divine Service its own, adds what best may serve in its own day- the living heritage and something new.ⁱ

Since the beginning of the Church, Christians have met to receive God's gifts of Word and Sacrament. The setting for such worship was at first simple and makeshift, and may still be. We think of the furnished upper room in the house of Mary of Jerusalem; of burial caves beneath the city of Rome; of an old cemetery or a forest clearing behind the former iron curtain; of a borrowed music practice room at Luther College. As the church grew and was accepted by the surrounding world, local congregations acquired their own buildings. At first these resembled slightly modified assembly halls. As time went by, church buildings became more and more distinct. Eventually many were cross-shaped and bore the cross to dizzying heights. Each stage of innovation was marked by a certain degree of controversy.

The use of visual art has been controversial almost from the beginning, with some in many times and places decrying the use of "graven images." Today stained glass windows are used so generally, as to be part of the public perception of a church building. Also common are paintings, decorative cloth hangings, and three-dimensional art, such as statues of Jesus and crucifixes.

Hymns and instrumental music have also been controversial in different times and places. Once derided as "lavish and sumptuous," the organ has become, in the public eye, as much a fixture of the standard church building as the stained glass window. All of these former innovations have helped Christians to visualize Christ and His cross, and to sing His praises. Innovations in the Church are not new and have, at times, been both a benefit and a hindrance to the Gospel.

Of course, it is possible to misuse any of these tools, or to allow them to become ends in themselves, as can any other human contribution to worship. We are, after all, sinful human beings, and can become covetous of the acceptance and praise of the world. You or I may show off our public speaking skills, our singing voices, our ability to play a musical instrument or our wealth and generosity, rather than pointing to the source and object of our faith and our abilities. This is also true of digital technology.

There are several beneficial uses to digital visual technology. The screen has the potential to provide a useful teaching aid. It can do so by using internet cut-and-paste materials illustrating the propers of the day or the season of the church year. It can also convey excerpts from Luther's *Small or Large Catechism* applying to the themes of the day or season.

It also has the potential to aid those who worship, through the projection of liturgical text and music, as well as hymns and the scripture texts of the day. In so doing it becomes a physical aid to those who have impaired vision or difficulty holding a hymnal.

On the other hand there are potentials for the misuse of this technology that merit caution in its use. The first of these is the temptation for worship to become a spectator sport. We are culturally conditioned to regard any screen as the source of entertainment. Thus, unless care is taken to use this technology to improve participation, we risk losing the definition of Divine Service. Caution must be taken so as not to turn the Divine Service into an entertainment venue and the Pastor into a stage player.

Secondly, this technology may attract requests to promote things not relevant to worship, such as business advertising or events sponsored by groups not in accord with our teaching and practice.

Thirdly, finding qualified individuals to run the system may be problematic. Persons must be well trained in the technology, but should also have a practical command of our confessions, at least of the catechisms, and be willing and able to accept pastoral oversight.

Fourthly, the technology may become a challenge to the pastor's time. He must not become so consumed with the visual imaging as to neglect tending the sheep in person, or lose his focus on preparing to preach the Word.

Fifthly, caution must be given to the initial cost of the equipment and installation. Ongoing upkeep to hardware and software may also be costly and a challenge to good stewardship of resources.

Finally, care must be taken that succeeding pastors, who may not be as familiar with the technology, are not held to an unreasonable standard.

In addition to the aforementioned cautions, the following issues are also of concern.

First, the screen or screens must neither obscure the pulpit, altar, and cross, nor draw the eyes of the congregation away from them. This would take the focus away from where it should be during the divine dialog of our liturgy. Should there be material on a screen during the sermon, this distracts the congregation from the message.

Secondly, a dependence on the electronic media creates a major problem should the system malfunction or a power outage occur. It is also not helpful when the image is illegible.

Thirdly, great care must be taken not to violate copyright laws by the unauthorized use of texts, music, or images.

Fourthly, the temptation to replace the hymnal with the screen is problematic. The hymnal in the pew is indispensable to the congregation and is a resource containing much devotional material, such as the *Catechism*, Psalms and prayers, which may be used before the service and taken home for use in devotions.

Finally, the technology comes with a temptation to let its attractive power replace due care and preparation in presenting the Word of God. It can never replace due diligence or hard work on the part of the preacher. We must guard against the impression that the Word is not powerful enough on its own and must be enhanced. This impression becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as the preparation and presentation of the Word becomes substandard.

In conclusion, digital visual technology has potential to aid teaching and the worshipper, but also comes with challenges. Some of these challenges require caution regarding the careful use of the technology, while others pose concerns over the nature of it. In either case, we must not simply imitate the use of such technology in business, or in the assemblies of other confessions. Overcoming these challenges within our own context will require faithfulness to God's Word and the Confessions of the Church.

ⁱ *Lutheran Worship*. The Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House. 1982. 6.