

"Powerpoint And All Its Works"

By Geoff Thomas

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In recent years PowerPoint has become a dominant force in worshiping communities across the theological and liturgical spectrum. In churches smitten with the Microsoft wonder, its power to affect the sensibilities of worshipers and thus to shape congregational identity is almost never discussed.

A tacit assumption is that PowerPoint computer presentations are merely a means to an end, a value-neutral tool used for innocent, perhaps even noble purposes: enlarging text for the hard of seeing; reducing the demand for and thus the production of printed materials; and bringing younger people, who spend much of their lives in front of screens--TV, computer, cell phone, PDA--into worship. But PowerPoint is not value-neutral. As information design analyst Edward Tufte has argued, PowerPoint promotes a kind of cognitive style that routinely disrupts, dominates and trivializes content.

Just as a typical PowerPoint presentation in an IBM boardroom too readily elevates format over content ("chaotic, smarmy and incoherent chartjunk," according to Tufte), PowerPoint in worship reproduces the same "stacking" of information, the relentless sequentiality that divorces content from context, the disposition toward consumption and commercialism, and the ethos of a sales pitch.

When the text of a hymn (or, more likely, a "praise song") is projected onto the big screen, it can only be experienced as fragmentary and incoherent. The narrative arc of a great hymn cannot be communicated when only a few lines of text can be accommodated on each of the 30-some frames it takes to display the entire hymn.

And how is it possible for children raised on PowerPoint in worship to learn how to read a hymn? I don't necessarily mean how will they learn to read music (though this is surely a dying practice), but how will they come to know how a hymn on a printed page works?

PowerPoint also conditions worshipers to act and react in visceral ways, so that the character of their bodily actions and emotional responses are at times downright Pavlovian. The screen, not the altar or cross, becomes the all-consuming center of attention, an object of intense fixation which triggers predictable reflexes and behaviors.

When PowerPoint malfunctions, for instance, people become nervous and lost; they become conditioned to worry that it will malfunction. They find themselves thinking more about the screen and the technician at the soundboard than about the God whom they've come to worship and the larger worshipping body of which they are a part.

Indeed, PowerPoint makes worshipers less aware of the persons around them; they engage in less eye contact and other forms of human interaction for fear of missing something on the screen. (One might argue that hymnals, prayer books and bulletins potentially create the same sort of isolation or individualism in worship, and it's possible that they do. But the sheer dominating presence of a projection screen in worship works in concert with PowerPoint's client-driven bias to cater rather blatantly to the consumer/customer/individual.)

To use PowerPoint in worship is to unwittingly set up a competition between what's projected on the screen and the human voice doing the preaching, praying or singing. And it's a contest that PowerPoint always wins because, as Richard Lischer has observed, when the brain is asked to listen and watch at the same time, it always quits listening.

What PowerPoint enthusiasts see as enhancing the worship experience--projecting pictures of water during a baptism or images of fire and wind on Pentecost--is instead a form of sensory overload that manipulates emotions and stifles imagination. It is difficult to cultivate an awareness and appreciation of ambiguity and mystery in worship when images are projected at strategically timed moments in the liturgy for the purpose of instructing worshipers what to think and feel.

Because PowerPoint has become central to worship in many churches, it is now common to find more technology experts than persons knowledgeable about liturgy involved in planning and leading worship.

This is a trend that goes hand in hand with the church's general infatuation with corporate business models--as evidenced in recent years by the invention of a new breed of minister: the executive pastor armed with an M.Div. and an M.B.A. The co-opting of these models and practices is not an innocent borrowing that leaves the inherent assumptions and biases of the corporate world behind.

And so questions beg to be asked. In regard to the increasing use of PowerPoint in churches of all shapes and sizes it is worth pondering: What understanding of the purpose of worship does it assume? What are the personal and communal tendencies it encourages? What sort of culture does it create? What kind of people does it produce? If Christians believe that the church and the worship it offers to God ought in some ways to counter the norms and practices of the surrounding culture, then what does it mean that after spending so much of our time each week in front of computer monitors, cell phones, and sports bar TVs, we come to church on Sunday and happily position ourselves in front of the biggest screen of all?

To be critical of the prevalence of electronic media in worship is not to be nostalgic or wistful for a time when worship was untainted by modern technology. The church at worship is always historically situated and unavoidably shaped by the realities of time, place and culture. (A pipe organ, after all, is a product of technology.) And in case I seem too much the rigid, humorless Luddite, it is important to say that there may be occasions or circumstances when computer-generated visual aids might be used meaningfully in worship. For instance, prior to the start of a service, projecting scripture verses or art appropriate to the day's themes may help to settle and center worshipers, discouraging the chatter and fidgeting that often persist up to the start of the service, and encouraging the whole community's focus on the worship to come.

For churches already heavily invested (monetarily and otherwise) in computer technology in worship, moving toward this kind of limited use may be a first step in recognizing the effects of PowerPoint in worship and in generating meaningful conversation.

My aim is not to condemn categorically all uses of technology in worship; that is neither desirable nor possible. But worshipers and worship leaders do need a more sophisticated and thorough understanding of the multiple effects of PowerPoint in worship, and in a great many cases a more judicious and limited use of it, is in order.

The first question, then, is not how we can get rid of computers in worship, but, rather, whether we are paying sufficient attention to the ways in which computer technology in worship forms and shapes us. For if faithful Christian discipleship requires that we attend carefully to all aspects of our lives--that we reflect deeply and continually on how we are shaped by what we do (and don't do)--and if we're to resist the easy formulas and shallow pieties that distort and trivialize the church's witness in the world, then ongoing attention to what we do in worship (and how we do it) is vital to such intentional discipleship.