

THE HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY USE OF STAINED GLASS

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Summary:

This paper outlines the development and practice around the use of stained glass. Included are some helpful suggestions for the introduction of this kind of symbolism/artwork in contemporary and evangelical settings.

Length: 17 pages

The use of stained glass in the Church has been prevalent for many centuries, but much of its origins and history is a mystery to most modern evangelicals. Some consider it to simply be an art form that has no liturgical or theological meaning, while others insist that there is much that stained glass art can offer in discovering biblical truth. Like the use of icons in Orthodox Christianity, stained glass was used in an oral society that was highly image based. Did the art of Christian stained glass come out of a culture that used colored glass for aesthetic purposes? Or did the church spearhead the use of stained glass and in fact create its own unique art form that has since transcended appeal to people of all kinds of religious beliefs? It is hypothesized that this investigation would lead to a discovery of the history and use of stained glass over the years and that its original purposes would be rediscovered for contemporary use in a day and age where symbols are prevalent in almost every aspect of society. It is hoped that this essay would show that it is possible to create a deeper sense of awe and mystery within the four walls of contemporary buildings through the effective use of stained glass.

In order to fully appreciate stained glass, it is imperative that there is an understanding firstly of the history and biblical use of light. Light, of course, is most fundamentally the sustenance of stained glass.¹ Without light, the beauty of the colors and shapes in each work of art can never be fully realized. Victor Beyer describes this mysterious relationship between stained glass and light as being comparable to other

¹ Jean-Jacques Duval. *Working With Stained Glass: Fundamental Techniques And Applications*. (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1972) 2.

relationships like the soul and body.² It is a picture of heaven and earth, where ethereal light and glass, as a product of melting sand, combine to produce a symbol of relationship between Creator and creation.³

In John 8:12, we read that Christ is also known as the Light of the world, and part of His task on earth was to enlighten those “that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.”⁴ 1 John 1:5 confirms this when it describes God as light and in Him there is no darkness at all. Thus, light is an appropriate symbol for God, and His presence amongst us; it is a glowing example of grace and enlightenment. John Sullivan also describes light as pure. It “penetrates darkness; it moves with incredible velocity; it nourishes life; it illumines all that comes under its influence.”⁵ Indeed, God has also used light in other instances in the Old Testament to show His presence and guide His people.⁶ In addition to light being a symbol, the image as a symbol can also be found biblically. The first mention of holy images in the Judeo/Christian tradition is in the 2nd book of Chronicles where King Solomon decorates the Temple with the images of angels.⁷ Thus, the combination of light and image naturally paved the way for the development of stained glass.

The exact origins of stained glass are uncertain, but it is conclusive that

² Victor Beyer. *Stained Glass and Windows*. Trans. M. von Herzfeld & R. Gaze. (London, UK: Oliver & Boyd Ltd., 1964) 5.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Luke 1:79.

⁵ John F. Sullivan, *The Externals of the Catholic Church*, P.J. Kennedy & Sons (1918). As quoted in <http://landru.i-link-2.net/shnyves/candles.htm>

⁶ Exodus 3:1-3 and 13:21

⁷ 2 Chronicles 3:10 as quoted in http://www.arthistoryclub.com/art_history/Icon last accessed on July 11, 2005

development first began in the Middle East, where small holes were made into the walls in order to allow outside light to illuminate building interiors.⁸ Craftsmen with artistic sensibility later incorporated various patterns, shapes and soon brought colored glass into the equation.⁹ This certainly was not an easy or obvious development because the price of making glass in those times was extremely costly, and it was both rare and valuable.¹⁰ It was often said that a piece of ruby glass had equal intrinsic value to the ancient Egyptians as the actual ruby itself. Later, windows began incorporating glass that was used from an earlier period, as glass was too valuable to be thrown away.¹¹ The Egyptians who invented the blowpipe around 300 B.C. pioneered modern glass and it quickly spread to Byzantium, Venice and eventually to France.¹²

Stained glass as we know it today was first used in European religious panels around the 11th century A.D.¹³ At first, they began as small panels in selected parts of certain churches, but it soon began to be a major centerpiece in the architecture.¹⁴ This coincided closely with the development of the flying buttresses in Gothic architecture, and relieved much of the stress in the walls and allowed for the introduction of more fragile elements into the building structure like window panels and glass.¹⁵ No longer did the buildings convey the massive weight and solidity of the Romanesque, but a new lightness was discovered that “energized and released the soul into an upward

⁸ E. Liddall Armitage. *Stained Glass: History, Technology And Practice*. (Newton, MA: Charles T. Branford Company, 1959) 19.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, 20.

¹³ <http://www.monterestainedglass.com/history.html> last accessed on July 12, 2005

¹⁴ Painton Cowen. *Rose Windows*. (London, UK: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1979), 7.

¹⁵ Ibid.

striving”.¹⁶ It is clear through this evidence that stained glass was indeed a unique Christian expression in architecture. This pioneered artistic expression not only in form but also in function.¹⁷

The popularity of stained glass emerged during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as being a major element in religious architecture, completely eclipsing the frescoes of the Romanesque period.¹⁸ Using the didactic and decorative functions of former wall paintings, the Gothic stained glass window offered a fresh element by providing its own light source, and established the visual condition in which it and other elements of architecture could be viewed.¹⁹ The use of light as an integral element of expression gave the message an energy that had never been seen in art before (as above).²⁰ To the medieval mind, art and ritual were a way to transcend time and place, and to connect with the universal truths of God.²¹ All art of the medieval age employed similar systems of framed and interrelated images, which emphasized the power of “seen” truths.²² This way of understanding God reflected society accurately as most people were illiterate and operated in an image-based culture.²³

One of the most prestigious places of worship that is known for its authentic twelfth century stained glass is the cathedral of Chartres in France. Many art historians consider Chartres to not only be the best-preserved example of medieval stained glass,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ <http://www.glass.nalinaart.com/evolution.html> last accessed on July 12, 2005

¹⁸ James Rosser Johnson. *The Radiance Of Chartres: Studies In Early Stained Glass Of The Cathedral*. (New York, NY: Random House Press, 1964) 3.

¹⁹ Johnson, 3.

²⁰ Cowen, 8.

²¹ Virginia Chieffo Raguin. *Reflections On Glass, 20th Century Stained Glass In American Art And Architecture*. (New York, NY: American Bible Society, 2003) 16.

²² Ibid, 19.

but also the most breath-taking.²⁴ In the Second World War, the administrators of Chartres disassembled its stained glass windows for fear of them being damaged and stored them safely underground in the church's crypt. In its place, it used a "whitish, plastic screen" called vitrex. The resulting effect produced a bleak and inexpressively sad environment; it would seem like the life had been taken out of the church, and it was, at that time, merely a hollow and lifeless building.²⁵ Mystery and wonder had been taken away, and the church lost the spiritual element that had so often brought people into reverent worship. It is clear that stained glass not only played an important role in the past for worship, but also still continues its efficacy in modern times.

According to Emile Male, medieval art contains certain images and symbols that bring meaning to each piece of work; and each medieval artist was obligated to learn the language of this art.²⁶ For example, the nimbus placed vertically behind the head serves to express sanctity, while the nimbus impressed with a cross is the sign of divinity, which is normally used to portray the three Persons of the Trinity.²⁷ Another common technique is the use of an aureole, which is a larger nimbus shaped light that emanates from the whole figure of a person; this symbol in stained glass typically expresses eternal bliss and belongs to the persons of God and various other saints.²⁸ A hand emerging from the clouds with a thumb and two fingers often symbolized divine

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Emile Male. *The Gothic Image: Religious Art In France Of The Thirteenth Century*. Trans Dora Nussey. (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1958) *preface page X*.

²⁵ Johnson, 3.

²⁶ Male, 2.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

intervention and the emblem of providence.²⁹ Other objects also played important roles in communicating truth. Often a stalk with two or three leaves symbolized that the scene took place on earth; a tower pierced by a doorway often symbolized a town; and typically the presence of an angel along city walls indicated the specific geographic location of Jerusalem.³⁰ Main biblical characters as well seemed to have recurrent descriptors that helped people identify who they were. For example, Peter typically had curly hair, a short thick beard and a tonsure, while Paul had a baldhead and long beard.³¹ Geometry also communicated a sense of time, with circles symbolizing the timelessness of God and heaven; and angular squares and rectangles symbolizing the finiteness of man and earth.³² All these details clearly show us that medieval art was deeply symbolic and what Male calls it to be equivalent to a “sacred script” of images.³³ Though beautiful to the eye, stained glass were primarily intended as instructive aids for teaching the illiterate poor the principles of their faith.³⁴ Throughout each service, preachers and clergymen could direct attention to the images and allow truth to illuminate from each picture.³⁵ People involved in the production of these images needed to have the mind of a theologian, an awareness of the people culture as well as the keen sensibility of the artist. This seems quite similar to the role of the

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Cowen, 95.

³³ Male, 3.

³⁴ Matthew Price and Michael Collins. *The Story Of Christianity*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999) 92.

³⁵ Ibid.

iconographers of the Eastern Orthodox faith,³⁶ as the dominant form of communication all over the world at that time was still largely oral.³⁷

Even as the birth of stained glass was shrouded with deep intention on symbolism, Male writes that this disciplined approach to art, slowly eroded as centuries advanced. By the second half of the sixteenth century, medieval art had become an enigma,³⁸ as society changed its dominant form of communication from oral-visual to the interpretive and individualistic nature of print.³⁹ Symbolism, which was the soul of Gothic art died off and the Church became ashamed of its past tradition.⁴⁰ As the years continued, the rigid rules that were present at the height of Gothic art in the thirteenth century were discarded but artists still esteemed stained glass as a legitimate art form, if only that.

In the Renaissance, stained glass continued to play an important role in the architecture of churches, but its original character was subdued, and it gradually lost its power to spiritually convince because artists felt less obligated to connect art with spiritual matters.⁴¹ It was secularized to fit classical taste and more emphasis was put on the aesthetic quality rather than attention to spiritual significance.⁴²

In the seventeenth century, a number of immense windows were erected but they were mostly transparent, which indicated that they were mostly practical implementations. It was written that Daniel Danneker of Strasbourg wrote to the king in

³⁶ Frederica Matthews-Green. *The Open Door: Entering the Sanctuary of Icons and Prayer*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2003. 30.

³⁷ M. Rex Miller, *The Millenium Matrix: Reclaiming The Past, Reframing The Future Of The Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004) 31.

³⁸ Male, vii

³⁹ Miller, 45.

⁴⁰ Male, vii

⁴¹ Beyer, 8.

⁴² Ibid.

concern of this new ambivalence towards stained glass art and the king responded prosaically that “no one was interested in the art form anymore and the dimming of light had no use for devotion either in the home or in the church.”⁴³ Sad as it was, it is clear that this might have been the lowest point in didactic stained glass use, and quite possibly where a lot of its original meaning was lost over a few hundred years.

It was not until the 1900s when there was a resurgence of medieval architecture interest and stained glass found a new audience in societies there were now predominantly literate.⁴⁴ In this environment, ideas were predominantly communicated through the printed word, but there was still nostalgic appreciation for European art in opulent North American societies.⁴⁵ Succumbing to the idea of European artistic superiority, many European stained glass artists were commissioned to create more work to be imported all over the world.⁴⁶ At this point, stained glass had almost lost all liturgical and theological meaning and was viewed purely for aesthetic reasons.

Moving into the twentieth century, all art had moved into what historians consider to be the Modern period. In this age, the definition of art would become more restrictive and highly prejudicial for the stained glass artist.⁴⁷ Art would be defined primarily as an aesthetic experience, which had been purified from any practical demands; and artists were considered to be separate or set apart from society.⁴⁸ Proponents of the Modern movement sought to be committed to universals and basics that would appeal to a broad base of people, and believed that moving away from the past could support a

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Raguin, 19

⁴⁵ <http://www.glass.nalinaart.com/brief2.html> last accessed on July 12, 2005

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Raguin, 25.

climate of the "elemental unity of mankind".⁴⁹ This is especially significant because much of this thought was developed in the turbulent environment of the early twentieth century that was marked by two world wars. Today, new technologies have given the artist more options than ever in terms of production efficiency and the access to more advanced mixtures of colours and pigments that can be utilized in their craft. Stained glass artist Arthur Stern has developed a series of window art on the Stations of the Cross and uses rectangular lattice with photo realistic black and white "snapshots" to illustrate the biblical account.⁵⁰ The work in stained glass today is as varied and unpredictable, but according to Raguin, one thing still remains consistent: "the success of the window is always a result of the designer's ability to understand the materials and to respond to the context".⁵¹

In the light of the rich history of stained glass, it is now appropriate to discuss its contemporary use and effectiveness for ministry today. As mentioned above, stained glass has progressed into a veritable art form that transcends religious boundaries. Currently as it stands, stained glass is as mainstream of an art form as photography or painting would be.⁵² Not only can they be found in museums⁵³, exhibitions and art galleries,⁵⁴ there is also a burgeoning industry that is dedicated to the production of stained glass as cherished art form; although like any other business, it is clear that

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 103.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² http://www.artglassworld.com/index.cfm?page=main_gallery last accessed on July 12, 2005

⁵³ <http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/Tiffany/listsgw.htm> last accessed on July 12, 2005

⁵⁴ <http://www.newyorkcarver.com/museum.htm> last accessed on July 12, 2005

financial profitability is a certain priority for these enthusiasts.⁵⁵ The use of stained glass has certainly come full circle from its origins as a teaching tool to strengthen members of the Christian faith, to a retail commodity that can be sold and bought like any other piece of furniture in your home. Stained glass making has, as such, become a vocational trade where people can go to school and be trained in the fine art of making these icons; undoubtedly the motivation for this as well can be pointed towards financial gain.⁵⁶ It is clear that the art has been separated from its original ministry use, only to be commoditized and exploited like other art forms.

In evangelical circles today, stained glass is mostly found in large mainline churches that were built earlier in this century. Typically, the more affluent a church is, the higher consideration there is for aesthetics. In my research, there was limited amount of information on the current, didactic use of stained glass, so only assumptions can be made about the intentionality of the images chosen for implementation in modern evangelical churches. Sadly, the deficiency of research material probably indicates a lack of intentionality in modern churches when compared to the literature that exists for the Chartres cathedral in France. As mentioned before, most of the purpose for implementing stained glass in North America was largely nostalgic in the twentieth century. With the history of stained glass evolving from highly intentional to being used solely for aesthetic purposes, it is certainly challenging to gauge its usefulness in ministry today. Unlike Orthodox icons that have stood the test of time and culture, the effective use of stained glass in evangelical circles today would center on two forms of thought. Either clergy has made a concerted effort to keep the symbolism

⁵⁵ <http://www.wixonartglass.com/index2.ivnu> last accessed on July 12, 2005

in the art as authentic as it was back in oral traditions; or there is an active, current engaging of the stained glass images and the relevant message that it has for the church today.

I would also hypothesize that there would be less of an emphasis on similar symbolic rules (as per Male) implemented in the thirteenth century. This is appropriate because, culture itself has changed and using the same symbolic meanings is less important than actually intentionally thinking about symbolism itself.⁵⁷ This is most appropriately achieved when church blueprints are being designed, so that there is congruency in the entire structure in the building to communicate a unified message. Additionally, in every church tradition, there are different symbols that are especially meaningful for each denomination. Anglicans, Lutherans and Alliance denominations all have unique symbols that are indigenous to their corporate structure; and each symbol has deep theological and ecclesiological meaning behind them. With the richness that stained glass can bring to a worship experience, it is unfortunate that only churches with deep financial wells are able to afford them; as before they are very expensive to implement, but can add so much influence to a worship space.⁵⁸

In my current ministry context, the use of stained glass is limited to the aforementioned boundaries. While there is a strong recognition that something must be done with our flexible meeting room to communicate a deeper sense of worship, we are not able to implement stained glass because we do not own the building we currently meet at nor is it a financial priority in the near future. On the other hand, we are in the

⁵⁶ http://www.stainedglass.org/main_pages/school.html last accessed on July 12, 2005

⁵⁷ Class discussion, CM746-Sign, Symbol and Sacred Act, Briercrest Seminary, May 9-13, 2005.

⁵⁸ <http://www.wixonartglass.com/howtoproceed.ivnu> last accessed on July 12, 2005

midst of designing banners that will greatly affect the atmosphere of the gym that we meet in; in other words, we are doing what we can. The flexibility of PowerPoint can also be used to display stained glass art, but while the effect of viewing stained glass can be edifying, it is certainly nowhere close to the ethereal sense of mystery and majesty that so many writers claim that the Chartres cathedral provides for its guests.⁵⁹ That doesn't mean that stained glass cannot be used but rather it is important to differentiate the degree of impact that stained glass can have if only being projected onto a screen. Much of the literature indicates that stained glass was effective because it was only one component of many other architectural factors that collaborated for a single purpose of creating a sense of mystery and awe.

As I will be in transition from the House of ROC in Moose Jaw, SK to Skyline Community Church in Bloomfield, NJ, I will discuss potential use in the light of the possibilities that I might face in New Jersey. As the church is a two year old church plant, I am aware that they do not own their own building, instead they meet at a local community centre with a fairly generic meeting space, furnished with a basic sound board in the back and slightly elevated stage in the front. There are two possible scenarios for when I arrive at Skyline: one case would be a complete lack of stained glass in PowerPoint use, or secondly a sporadic use of images as way to accentuate the aesthetic experience rather than intentionally using stained glass as a way to receive revelation from God. Regardless, in my discussions with the pastors, I do not get the sense that there is an active, intentional use of any images in their worship. I have been told clearly that there are many opportunities within the worship arts area of

⁵⁹ <http://www.glass.nalinaart.com/evolution.html> last accessed on July 12, 2005

the church and my main role will be to help the church grow in their expressions of biblical worship. Effective sacred space is integral to the worship experience as it communicates so many obvious and subtle messages at the same time.

Like all changes, I believe it is very important to be patient and to be committed long-term to change in the community. People rarely like change, let alone fast change; therefore, any adjustments must be balanced with sensitivity and a degree of authority. I would probably begin to include stained glass images more frequently as a part of the aesthetic; that way when people come to worship, they are used to seeing these images even though they may not fully understand its symbolic and theological implications. Next, I would begin talking about the use of stained glass during my worship service planning sessions, as well as my music team practices. That way I can sense if the leaders and committed members of the church are receptive to a deeper use of symbols in their worship. If I sense a strong enthusiasm and support for the use of stained glass, I would then proceed to spend about thirty seconds per service describing the liturgical implications of the image, and allow for a time of reflection so that the illuminated truth from each image can speak into the hearts of the people in the congregation. As time progresses and receptivity increases, I would likely spend more than half a minute and go further in depth. Where originally I would introduce one or two liturgical implications, I might be lead to discuss the image fully and spend more time in reflection and response.

Ultimately, I would have a sense of accomplishment when symbols are introduced into our service with intentionality and purpose; and that all symbols, including stained

glass art, would be carefully considered by the worship planning team, as ways to connect our people with truth that is inspired by the Holy Spirit. At some point in the future, it might be an appropriate to hold a Catholic mass that focused on the Stations of the Cross as way to relive the passion of Christ during Easter. With PowerPoint, the use of stained glass images from that theme could be used, along with various other art forms that all seek to connect the worshippers to truths and realities that are not just ethereal but also both inspiring and solemn.

So often, in various art forms, Christianity has seldom been a pioneer of anything original artistically. In fact, it can be argued that the modern Christian faith is often behind in the times, when it came to the art expression; often trying to learn from and copy styles from culture in an effort to be relevant. The development of the Christian contemporary music industry over the past twenty years is good evidence of that. So it was very refreshing when I realized that the church in medieval times, instead of being followers, were actually trailblazers and leaders in artistic communities. The development of stained glass as an art form is one such example. It not only developed on the idea of image as symbolism, it did so with fresh originality and purpose. In oral societies, stained glass was not only a teaching tool but also inspiring art that influenced the heart of believers into a deeper sense of awe and worship. It had a rich tradition of symbolism much like Orthodox Christianity still possesses with their wooden icons; and this intentional symbolism along with letting image speak to the soul is one that should not be forsaken. As the emergent church moves forward by revisiting the past,⁶⁰ it will undoubtedly find use in the rich history of stained glass art. Many modern mainline

churches currently have stained glass as a part of their building architecture; what a privilege and delight those could possibly be for the clergyman who chooses to tap into its didactic virtues! Although stained glass has evolved over the centuries to be nothing more than an art form today, churches must reclaim their lost meaning; they must move forward not only towards a more substantial use of symbols in ministry, but also a better understanding that symbols are everywhere and to ignore their existence is understand the current context of ministry poorly. The future is bright for the deeper use of stained glass in our worship. As we reflect on the colored glass and geometric shapes, let us remember that we can be artistic leaders in our communities like our forefathers many generations ago. Let the church be further released as leaders in artistic communities, and let those expressions be firstly worship unto God!

⁶⁰ Robert Webber *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing The Challenges Of The New World*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002) 82.

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