

# WORSHIP AND THE SCREEN

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## Summary:

This paper outlines potential uses and dangers of technology focusing specifically around the projection screen.

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## Table of Contents

Introduction .....	0
Technology and the Church .....	0
Impact of Television.....	2
Reasons for the Use of the Screen.....	3
How to Use The Screen.....	5
<i>Video</i> .....	5
<i>Text Support</i> .....	6
<i>Graphics</i> .....	7
<i>Integrating the Screen</i> .....	7
Dangers of Using the Screen.....	8
Impacts on Leaders.....	11
Conclusion.....	12

## Introduction

“Men and women of every age have had to integrate technology into their personal and communal perspectives, and to manage the social, moral and intellectual anxieties that the relationship with technology occasions. Every age then is truly an ‘Age of Technology’.”<sup>1</sup>

Every age has a way of dealing with and utilizing technology. So too, the electronic age in which we live. Technology has created a number of challenges for the church as it endeavors to worship God, reach people for Christ and stay true to the gospel. In this report, I will briefly discuss the role Christianity has had in the development of technology, the influence of television on our culture and the use of the screen in our churches as a way of engaging this electronic culture.

## Technology and the Church

Religion has always had a part in the development of technology and even encouraged it. The Monastics for instance had the view that the mechanical arts had been divinely inspired. As we continued to discover and develop all of the arts, we would begin to recover mankind’s divine likeness and restore the ‘Adamic perfection’ that had been lost at the fall.<sup>2</sup> They included in ‘the arts’, all of the mechanical arts, which included everything from cloth making to commerce to medicine. They would have defined technology as, “Anything that by its existence extends the range of human capability beyond its natural limitations.”<sup>3</sup>

Although the Millenarians had a different view of the future of life on this earth, they had a similar view of technology. Millenarians viewed progress in the arts as the mark and means of millennial advance, the fulfillment of divine prophecy. They had the view that things would be

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<sup>1</sup> Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>2</sup> David Noble, *The Religion of Technology* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 16.

getting better due to the technological advances and that they were helping to achieve bringing Christ's kingdom here to earth. "The evangelical effort to expand the reach of Christianity in accordance with its universalist claims and eschatological expectations encouraged exploration, and thereby advanced the arts upon which exploration depended."<sup>4</sup>

Yet as we look at the impacts that these advances have had on humanity and even the church, there are those like Neil Postman who believe that the cost has been too great. He argues that "New technologies alter the very structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop."<sup>5</sup> Yet this has always been the case in our society. When new technology is developed, it has an impact and sometimes becomes bigger than the uses for which it was invented. For instance, the printing press was bigger than the words that were being printed on it when it was first developed, but "eventually the press was assimilated into daily life. So now too has electronic media become assimilated into daily life."<sup>6</sup>

Postman is right in the sense that we need to be careful in how we utilize and encourage the development of technology. "Technology is a powerful force... it bears within it, both the seeds of human destruction and the seeds of human transformation."<sup>7</sup> However, unlike Postman, I believe that technology can be "ordered and redirected through the application of human will and commitment."<sup>8</sup> As the world continues to develop in its use of technology, so too must the church continue to evolve in its use of technology to meet the needs of the electronic culture in which we now find ourselves.

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<sup>4</sup> David Noble, *The Religion of Technology* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 29.

<sup>5</sup> Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Len Wilson, *The Wired Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>7</sup> Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994) 25.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

## Impact of Television

Television has had a unique impact on our electronic culture and in turn on the church. Most of what our great-grandparents knew was written down, in all areas of their life including Christianity. “Printed matter was virtually *all* that was available. There were no movies to see, radio to hear, photographic displays to look at, and records to play. There was no television.”<sup>9</sup> With the advent of the camera and ultimately of television our new focus became image and not printed word. This influence was widespread and continues to this day. Most of the people that walk through the church doors on any given Sunday and who we engage on daily basis, watch thirty hours of television per week or more. The influence of television has saturated our culture.<sup>10</sup>

This has brought several issues to bear on people’s expectations of the church. Firstly, the television has contributed to the view in society that we must satisfy our short term needs immediately: instant gratification. This can make it difficult when speaking with someone about long-term issues like the status of their soul. It has also contributed to the view of worship as satisfying my own needs. People are told all week long that life is about meeting their needs, so it is no wonder that on Sundays people view our worship services in light of its ability to satisfy their own needs.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, the television has contributed to the need of the contemporary worshiper to have their spiritual needs met “quickly and professionally and without a high degree of personal effort required.”<sup>12</sup> This has some definite implications to churches as it relates to the involvement

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<sup>9</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1986), 41.

<sup>10</sup> Len Wilson, *The Wired Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 29.

<sup>11</sup> Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 117.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

of its people in worship through participation. As we move from a broadcast era to an electronic era, however, I think that this is changing.

Thirdly, as we consider the components of our church services, we must recognize that those who have come to worship in our churches are “most comfortable with fairly rapid ‘scene changes’, from leader to choir to reader to instrumentalist to video display, with none of these demanding long periods of sustained attention.”<sup>13</sup> The average shot length in television is about 3-5 seconds.

These impacts of television on our society and on the worshiper in our churches should have a bearing on how we choose to engage this electronic culture. One of the ways we can do this is through the use of the screen in our churches.

### Reasons for the Use of the Screen

The simple answer to the question “why use the screen in the church context?” is that our culture demands it. In order to have an impact on the culture in which we live and the people with whom we interact, we must speak the language of those we are trying to reach. As the philosopher Voltaire said, “If you would speak to me, you must first learn my language.”<sup>14</sup> In order to have the right to be heard, churches need to be able to speak the language of the electronic culture in which we live. However, for many years we have lagged behind in our development and use of the different technologies that have been available to us.

Our language is not current as Leonard Sweet argues, it is “an outmoded print language that is out of touch with how people today live and move and have their being.”<sup>15</sup> There is a necessity that we understand how those in the electronic culture are wired by engaging the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 119.

<sup>14</sup> Len Wilson, *The Wired Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 9.

culture in which they live. Tex Sample insists that one must “engage in the practices of a cultural formation if one is to get some accurate sense of what goes on there.”<sup>16</sup> One of the areas that we must engage the culture is in the use of image. In the church, this means developing in the use of various media, which help engage the different senses. It means using graphics, audio, video and other technology applications to communicate the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It means recognizing that providing people “information is not enough, presentation matters. Effective or excellent media for this age both engages the mind and the heart.”<sup>17</sup>

One of the best places to achieve this in the church service is in the use of the screen. When used properly, the screen can help to engage the senses visually and aurally. Although, there are dangers to be aware of when we consider the use of the screen in the worship setting, we must push forward and be creative in its use. “The screen is the stained glass, and the cross for the electronic media age, except now we have the privilege of working in a dynamic rather than a static form. The screen is the ever-changing canvas, constantly transforming new imagery before us.”<sup>18</sup> The use of the screen in worship is not something that we should be eliminating but something that we should be embracing. We should be unlocking the creative ideas for its use for the expansion of the kingdom, while still holding on to the truth of the message of the gospel and remembering what worship is.

Worship is ultimately for God, yet if we do not engage this electronic culture we will end up with people trying to worship God in a language that they do not understand. It is possible that using the screen can help us discover ways of worshiping God that we would not have embraced or considered in our literate cultural churches. As Sample concludes, “We fail to see

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<sup>16</sup> Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Len Wilson, *The Wired Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

how images “open up new ways of engaging the world and new approaches to a host of issues and problems.”<sup>19</sup> I think Sample would include how we worship in his conclusion.

### How to Use The Screen

Understanding then, that using the screen is an important way that churches can engage the electronic culture, there are some practical applications of the screen within the church worship context that can be used.

Firstly, we must understand that people who belong to the electronic culture have short attention spans. Therefore, constant movement is necessary to hold their attention. I don't think this means that they always have to be stimulated. For instance, I think that we are finding that silence and contemplation is an element that this same generation of individuals value highly. However, the length of time given to each activity is greatly decreased. Neil Postman concludes, “that short and simple messages are preferable to long and complex ones, that drama is to be preferred over exposition.”<sup>20</sup> This has implications for our first use of the screen.

### *Video*

One of the ways that the screen can be used to fulfill Postman's drama preference is through the use of video. There are numerous ways in which video can be used as part of a worship service. Video can be used for sermon illustrations. As a sermon is being given, video shots reflecting elements of the sermon can be projected onto the screen with no direct reference being made to the screen by the preacher. Video can be used to give the message in a storytelling format. Rob Bell, Pastor of Mars Hill Church in Michigan, is a master storyteller who sheds new light on Biblical stories through careful research and creative presentation. He has a series of videos in which he gives his teaching while undertaking an activity like planting trees or building

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<sup>19</sup> Tex Sample, *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1998), 18.

<sup>20</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1986), 131.

a bon fire, which metaphorically ties into the teaching that he is giving as he goes about the activity.<sup>21</sup> These videos can be purchased for use, but the method can also be copied in our own church context as we continue to grow and develop the expertise necessary in our churches to do these multimedia activities. This storytelling format is a resurgence of oral tradition, which is one of the marks of churches moving from the broadcast era into the electronic era. This storytelling allows us to engage multiple senses at the same time.

The screen can also be used to show video clips from movies that your congregation would be familiar with. These clips would help to illustrate, often metaphorically, the key point of a message and can help to bridge to the message of the speaker. They can also draw a contrast to the teaching that the speaker is trying to present during the service. “Video is persuasive in that it establishes the setting and creates connections drawing viewers to a point, which may then be communicated in more detail through text.”<sup>22</sup> This is not always necessary though, as often the video itself can communicate through symbol and emotion that does not require text.

Lastly, video can be used to show personal stories of faith. Moments from missionaries detailing their passions, successes and failures; stories of how God has led faithful elderly saints during their lifetimes; and stories of God’s healing in peoples lives, are all examples of how video can be used to engage our electronic culture. This is also another example of the resurgence of storytelling in our culture, which helps us to engage people with more of their senses.<sup>23</sup>

### *Text Support*

In many churches today the primary use of the screen is for text support. The screen is used to project music lyrics, sermon notes and Scripture reading. Although, there are some

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<sup>21</sup> For information on the videos see [www.Nooma.com](http://www.Nooma.com).

<sup>22</sup> Len Wilson, *The Wired Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 57.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

dangers to this use, which we will consider later, this use of the screen is not bad in and of itself. However, only using the screen for this purpose will not satisfy the needs of the electronic generation. Projecting only words is a throwback to the print culture from which we have come. There are benefits, however, to using the screen for this purpose. When reading Scripture, all the people will be using the same translation. The preacher's main points can be seen as well as heard which will help to engrain them in the congregation through the use of multiple senses.

### *Graphics*

There are numerous opportunities to use graphics on the screen in the church service as well. One of the most common is to use the screen for running announcements advertising upcoming events. This would not be just limited to text but include pictures of a past event; images and symbols associated with the event and would include movement within the advertisements. PowerPoint and other software programs such as Easy Worship or Media Shout are designed to help churches achieve this easily in their services.

Graphics can also be used to help develop a theme throughout a service. All the slides for the music and sermon may include the same graphic to help establish this theme. For instance, if a theme of "Chris the Shepherd" is being developed for the service, a lamb or a staff may be used on each slide to help to visually support this theme.

### *Integrating the Screen*

One of the goals of media ministry in the church is to move the congregation to the point over time where the presence of the screen is not noticed anymore during services. This is a difficult transition for churches to make and requires a great deal of planning. It also requires that media ministry be done with excellence. This will likely require some investment in some additional equipment to help achieve this. However, "many churches are unwilling to make the

sacrifices necessary to speak the language of the culture fluently or with excellence.”<sup>24</sup> In my own church, we purchased a video mixer to help with the multiple transitions in our services between video, PowerPoint and camera to help take the focus off the screen and the transitions that were taking place.

The church that has integrated media into its services also does not forget about the traditions of the past. Len Wilson suggests, “A media integrated church does not abandon the traditions of the church, it reinterprets how that tradition speaks to its constituents at the place in which they live.”<sup>25</sup>

The revolution of the computer has helped in this area. The Internet makes available to us an abundance of resources from the past, as well as present, that have the potential to be integrated into our services. Editions of ancient texts, prayers of early church fathers, congregational music and other worship aids are all available to us on line. Through these sources, our worship can be deepened and the treasures of the past and creative application of them in the present can effectively be used with the aid of the screen.<sup>26</sup>

### Dangers of Using the Screen

Even with the all the potential uses of the screen in the church service and the benefits that it brings for reaching the lost and helping the electronic culture worship, there are a number of dangers that we must consider and deal with if we are going to have a positive integration of media ministry in our churches.

Firstly, we need to be careful to make sure that the media ministry is done well. One of the challenges for churches will be to not treat media as an add on in our services, “The A.V.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 48.

mentality is the use of electronic media as an afterthought, a value to be added, or something less than an intrinsic ingredient in worship and church life.”<sup>27</sup> Often times a service is planned around a preacher’s message and only after is media added to try and relate to the topic. There is also still the tendency in many churches to use the screen only for displaying text, words to songs and Scripture reading. This will not be sufficient in meeting the needs of the electronic culture, which is infused with images all day long. If media ministry is going to be done poorly, then it will only distract the participants and would have been better for it to not be done at all.

We also need to be careful not to advertise something we are not. Many of our worship services are “steeped in the pre-electronic media culture”<sup>28</sup>. We use media only for outreach and for advertising campaigns. However, our product does not match our advertising. “It does no good to draw in visitors at a surface level when there is no system in place to continue speaking their language once they arrive.”<sup>29</sup> I think this statement by Wilson not only applies to seeker-driven churches trying to reach the lost, but also to those churches whose worship of God does not meet the needs of the electronic generation. In other words, once people become Christians, it does not change the culture to which they are still a part.

Secondly, we need to be careful of deifying our leaders by projecting them on the screen. The “persistent image of the preacher carries the clear message that it is he and not He, who must be worshiped...the power of a close-up... makes idolatry a continuous hazard.”<sup>30</sup> Although, Postman is referring to the television, we should heed the warnings as well when we contemplate projecting the pastor’s image on the big screen behind him. In large churches, there is an argument to be made for doing this so that people are able to better see the pastor. We often do

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<sup>27</sup> Len Wilson, *The Wired Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 39.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>30</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1986), 122.

this for baby dedications in our services so that all can see. However, pastors and leaders must be aware of the potential danger and must always be seen to exalt Christ.

Thirdly, we must be wary of the use of the screen and other media for the purpose of putting on a good show. Postman points out to us again in referring to television that “our priests and presidents, our surgeons and lawyers...need worry less about satisfying the demands of their discipline than the demands of good showmanship.”<sup>31</sup> What Postman is saying is easily transferable to the use of the screen in our churches. We often pay more attention to putting on a good show with all the bells and whistles of media and how that impacts peoples emotions rather than making sure that the gospel is clearly shared and God has been truly worshipped. Along this same line, we need to be sure that the use of image does not totally obscure the intended message. Postman points out that “the picture forced exposition into the background and in some instances obliterated it altogether.”<sup>32</sup> We need to be careful that there is not just image with no content.

Fourthly, I am worried about the use of the screen to project Scripture, which will contribute to Biblical illiteracy. People need to be encouraged to bring and read their Bibles as part of the church service. In a purely oral culture “a high value is always placed on the power to memorize, for where there are no written words, the human mind must function as a mobile library.”<sup>33</sup> In a similar way that the printing press contributed to the decline of Scripture memory, the screen contributes to Biblical illiteracy by taking the printed word out of peoples hands. Even the monks continued to copy the Scriptures by hand after the printing press was invented to help them with their memorization of Scripture.<sup>34</sup> We must continue to encourage people to read

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 45.

God's Word on their own by modeling that in our services. If we fail to do this, people will begin to treat the Word as another image on the screen, temporary and gone as quickly as the next image appears on the screen. So will it be lost in the short-term memory of our minds.

Fifthly, we need to be careful that our services do not remain in the Broadcast Culture by ignoring the need for people to participate in our worship services. People come by this broadcast mentality naturally through their abundance of television watching. Yet there is a "lack of contact and partnership" that is created "as we stare at VDU's and TV screens."<sup>35</sup> I would add church screens to this list because the screen often creates less and not more participation in our services and continues the trend towards the privatization of religion as opposed to religion in community. We need to be careful not to have our blinkers on when it comes to assessing the impact that this technology has on the people in our churches.<sup>36</sup>

There is also a danger of limiting participation in ministry due to the expertise required to develop the media, which goes onto the screen. Although a team approach will be necessary to accomplish media ministry effectively, participation is limited to those that have the expertise, especially when we consider the need for excellence, which we looked at previously. This creates a sense of power for those involved as well. "There is that quality of technology that often bestows on its user, subtly or not, a sense of power, almost of omnipotence."<sup>37</sup> This can lead to pride on the part of those involved in media ministry.

### Impacts on Leaders

The use of the screen in ministry has several impacts on church leadership and pastors. First, there needs to be a reeducation of our leaders. The majority of leaders in our churches have

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<sup>35</sup> Ruth Conway, *Choices At The Heart Of Technology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Meritt Ierley, *Wondrous Contrivances: Technology at the Threshold* (New York: NY: Clarkson Potter, 2002), 10.

been trained based upon a print media background, therefore they must be educated to the needs of the electronic generation and given strategies for engaging them. Secondly, preaching styles may need to change to become more of a narrative with a focus on storytelling. Integration of media ministry as part of the traditional sermon will need to take place. Thirdly, there will need to be a willingness on the part of the pastor to give up a certain amount of control over the pulpit by developing creative teams. Media ministry done with excellence must be fully integrated in the church services requiring a greater number of creative resources and technical expertise. “It is through unpaid people, pursuing their gifts and talents in ways they never dreamed possible, that a media ministry can transform lives and build the kingdom.”<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

“If technology and worship can enter into a relationship of mutual critique, there is the possibility that both may undergo genuine renewal.”<sup>39</sup> This statement by Susan White reflects the type of attitude that we as leaders need to have with respect to the use of technology and in particular the use of the screen in our church services. There are lots of positive ways that the screen can be integrated into the church to help us to engage the electronic generation. As long as we are cognizant of the dangers and always reflect on the impact that media is having on our congregation and the worship of our God there is the potential, as White suggests, of renewing our worship. Electronic media cannot be allowed to displace the need for participation in worship and the need for face-to-face relationships in community but there is a greater danger of not utilizing media ministry. “The church must not fall prey to the temptation to retreat to the past because of immediate discomfort. It must rejoice in the new possibilities open to man

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<sup>38</sup> Len Wilson, *The Wired Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 75.

<sup>39</sup> Susan White, *Christian Worship and Technological Change* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 122.

through the application of technology to social life.”<sup>40</sup> In doing so, we fail to engage the electronic generation that we currently have in our communities and the children we are raising in our churches. We must agree with the apostle Paul when he says, “ I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some (1Corinthians 9:22b).”<sup>41</sup> When we as congregations use the screen to help us speak the language of our culture, it is “not entertainment. It is simply communicating the message of the gospel in a way that concurs with how we now think, as products of our culture.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> H. Cunliffe-Jones, *Technology, Community and Church* (London: Independent Press, 1961), 155.

<sup>41</sup> Scripture is taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

<sup>42</sup> Len Wilson, *The Wired Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 103.

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