



A Theology of Powerpoint

In 2005, when I was the director for CIVA, I worked with several artists on a project involving contemporary media in liturgical or worship arts. This initiative was a multi-year project that involved a number of individuals both at a conference in the Los Angeles area and at CIVA's workshops on the campus of Gordon College in Massachusetts. An hour-long workshop at the conference provided some great beginning discussion on the topic of computers and multi-media in the worship space.

The presenter, Kim Garza (www.abovestudio.com), had some great words of wisdom for those gathered. Kim is a graphic designer whose graduate work was in motion graphics (i.e. video and motion-based graphics in web design). She had the task of speaking to a group of artists, pastors, and other lay people who had very different experiences with, and attitudes toward, the use of video projection in the worship setting. A common theme in the discussion was that the pastors tended to not have any idea what the proper use of technology in worship was, and that the *techies* who tended to run the video projectors and *Powerpoints* had no sense of aesthetics.

One root of the problems that arise from this is that, at many churches, any warm body who volunteers to do something is often given the reins even if he or she has no expertise in that area or is particularly gifted in it (spiritually or otherwise). Another problem is that anyone can call him or herself an artist and others will simply concur. Unfortunately, we are more likely to let people with no gift or training take on the role of an "aesthetics director" just because they seem to "have good taste." Our feeling that taste is subjective does us a disservice here. We are a little less tolerant of listening to that person in the choir sing off key than watching the ill effects of a poorly planned *Powerpoint*.

A friend of mine who participated in the workshops and discussions came up with the phrase ***Theology of Powerpoint***. I continue to use it when talking about this subject. Garza mentioned some things that were fairly obvious to me, such as incorporating sans serif fonts, contrasting colors that also have a value contrast, limiting the color palette to three or four colors, and checking the readability of a projected text on a wall or screen before it is ever seen by the worshipping congregation. These speak to the aesthetic side of things, but there are many more elements that go deeper into theological principles.

Those theological problems come when the pastor and worship team (including the person in charge of the *Powerpoint*) are not in full communication about how all the elements come together. Every church and denomination has a specific theological outlook that, consciously or not, impacts the way the people go about things. Sometimes, when things like the preparation of a *Powerpoint*—in both words and images—are not analyzed with theological precepts in mind, an unintentional disconnect takes place. This can result in the conveyance of a very subtle and perhaps contradictory message to the worshipping body.

I have stated before that the visual elements of the church building and worship setting should certainly be analyzed by those trained in the field. My hope is that the staff and congregations at more and more churches will take seriously the visual aspects of worship. While they may seem unimportant to many, they convey messages that are integral to our understanding of worship.