

Essential Devices for Communication

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We are touchy-feely people. We are absorbed by the moving pictures of television and film. We are comforted by the taste of our favorite comfort foods. We are soothed by the lullaby of our mothers. Never fear, I am not assaulting your masculinity! No, we like to be stimulated and I would argue we need this stimulation of all our senses. Different medias or messages require different stimulation. As this is relevant in our daily lives, it only follows that use of multiple senses is essential to effectively communicate the gifts of God.

In 1977, Dr. Manfred Clymes published his work "Senticity: the Touch of Emotions." Dr. Clymes, a concert pianist, neurophysiologist, electronics engineer, poet, and philosopher, seeks to scientifically analyze the relationship of specific sensory stimuli to brain wave patterns and ultimately emotional connotation. What Dr. Clymes asserts is that our forms of emotional expression are genetically programmed. His research of Western, Eastern, and Aborigine peoples shows that certain sounds and music result in consistent emotional expression. His conclusion then is simple: emotions are grounded precisely in the natural order and the keys to communication of emotion are designed according to specific laws. While Dr. Clymes does not express a Christian faith, his results affirm a Biblical understanding of a created order. This created order has consistent means of communication and expression regardless of our cultural setting.

Scientists and musicians alike have written much as to the relationship of key, tonality, dynamic, or rhythm and their relationship to conveying different emotions. In the realm of music, there is no disagreement that a solo intended by the composer to be played on oboe does not carry the same emotional impact played on trombone or electric guitar. A joyous hymn recast by the organist in a minor key and played as a dirge does not convey the same emotional impact. The words intended to carry this joy have a disassociated emotional message conveyed by the tune. The text and the tune are not properly married.

In homiletics, much of our critical evaluation of a sermon revolves not around content but the delivery. We are critical of the tone of our voice, eyes, facial expression, body posture, variation of expression, and pacing. Again as clever composers we are essentially looking to harmonize our text with our delivery. No argument will be found that a scowl and angry tone is not appropriate to convey the full sweetness of the Good News. In the same way, our tone, expression, and physical demeanor can limit the full sternness of the Law.

Often in our discussions of church practice, we limit the discussion of sensory communication to musical expression and sermon delivery. Dr. Clymes' research and our personal experience demand our appreciation of the many and various other sensory messages we convey. We have many expressions and devices within the church that con-

vey specific words or emotional messages. Examples of smell are Easter lilies, chrism, incense, or Christmas trees. Examples of visual communication are vestments, posture and body language (standing, kneeling, bowing) and movement about the altar. Examples of tonal communication are vocal character, inflection, acoustic interaction, musical genre, and tonality. We experience touch with our folded hands, kneeling, standing, the water of baptism, the hands of blessing, and the reception of the Sacrament of the Altar.

You might notice that the long list of sensory stimulation we commonly use in the church mostly falls into the realm of adiaphoron. Derogatory and inflammatory remarks of these devices use abound such as “turning church into a circus”, “high church” and “smells and bells.” In our context, the use of incense is widely criticized. Ironically we look forward to the smells of the Easter lilies and the Christmas trees, stimulating the same sense of smell. Certainly we can go too far by using false or unnatural stimulation. Many in the so-called “emergent church” embrace an uncritical approach to sensory communication. They often follow an “itchy ear” policy that gives the consumer exactly what they want. Often this represents neither a clear Law nor Gospel message.

Rather than throw off every touchy-feely stimulus in the name of adiaphoron, the church should approach them critically. What we do affects what we say. When we are in the presence of God, do we as laity or pastors behave as if we are in the presence of the President or foreign dignitary or do we behave as if we’re in the bar? What are the implications and message does each posture present to our fellow believers?

When St. Paul speaks of the relationship of man and woman in Ephesians 5, he correlates this relationship to that of Christ and the Church. The Holy Spirit spoke to him and gave him this revelation. St. Paul recognizes this relationship is foreign to him and so is shrouded in mystery. How do we communicate this and all mysteries of the church? Can such mysteries as expressed in the sacraments be explained in mere words or do we use our face, hands, tone of voice, and vestments to convey what we believe? Does a rapid recitation of the words of institution in monotone given by a man in a suit express the same reality of Christ’s real presence as an expressive voice in liturgical garb?

We use critical eyes and ears to appropriate forms for our use in the liturgy. Not all musical genres, visual cues, and body language convey the message intended by God’s Word. Our theology of worship demands that we convey God’s Word in an authentic fashion. The otherworldly, heavenly character of Christ’s banquet feast while conveyed by Word is supported and reinforced by other sensory messages.

While it may be easy to dismiss the forms used in so-called “high church”, it is essential to recognize the freedom given in our worship practice does not give us license to be fast and free with sensory stimuli. The Word is too precious to be shrouded by false musical, physical, or verbal forms. Critical use of sensory devices within the liturgical setting is essential to properly communicate the gifts of God. It’s okay to be touchy-feely!