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THE GRAVEN IMAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A VISUAL RHETORICAL APPROACH

by Amber M. Stamper

Christian theologians, apologists, and practitioners of the faith have long concerned themselves with the appropriate use and function of images and visual aids in the church. From analysis of scriptural texts regarding the second commandment banning graven images to the iconoclastic emphasis of John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the use of art and image throughout church history has remained in tension with concerns over idolatry and heresy. Nevertheless, the early church's initial discussions of iconography could not have anticipated our current image-inundated culture.

From billboards advertising Christian speakers to television and film adaptations of the Gospels to the mass image-based marketing of Christian product lines such as *Not of this World*, the default position of the evangelical church today appears to favor image production and consumption over image skepticism. The centrality of images to our culture is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the realm of social media, where the image has come to function as a type of shorthand badge of identity and mode of argument: we cultivate profiles of our lives through visuals and share our ideologies through memes (i.e., viral, culturally recognizable digital texts—frequently imaged-based—that are creatively employed to different ends in a variety of contexts). As with any trend, however, no matter how apparently innocent, it is valuable to reflect on the role the trend is playing in our culture and attempt to determine appropriate use.

On Facebook and Instagram, two of the most popular and most visually oriented of social media platforms, one's online identity is established by the posting of a "profile picture," embedding our very identity in the visual. We are encouraged to create "timelines" or "newsfeeds" of our life, centered on moments captured through a

mixture of text and image. More pertinently, however, is the sheer number of pictures that are regularly shared via these sites online. By 2013, Facebook users had uploaded over 250 billion photos to the site and average approximately 350 million uploads per day.[1] On Instagram, over 30 billion photos have been posted since the network's launch in 2010.[2] It should not surprise us in the least that the image-sharing feature of social networking has become among the most popular: the saying "an image is worth a thousand words" pithily captures the way in which we are able to circumvent extensive description, analysis, or discussion of a subject through the substitutive use of an image.

I can, for example, show my love for my husband with a picture of us riding horses together; I can identify myself with sociopolitical points of view by adding filters (often supplied by the social media platform itself) to my profile picture, as in the recent cases of the rainbow filter in support of the national legalization of gay marriage in America. Without words, I am able to assert essential aspects of my life and beliefs instantly.

Christians may be found using images for a diversity of purposes online. A short history of the church's view on image use will prove informative. Interestingly, despite later controversy over the value of images during the Reformation, scholar Averil Cameron has argued that in the early church the use of both 2-D and 3-D visuals were among the most common and powerful evangelistic tools. Indeed, Cameron credits the early Christians' willingness to adopt the "pagan" traditions of religious imagery, icons, and statuary as a prime reason for the religion's early and rapid dissemination. Visuals were so effective because where higher-level logical modes of persuasion proved inaccessible to laypeople, the religious image was "a way of educating the ignorant and illiterate."[3] Archeological findings and written records document the existence of images of Jesus from at least the second century onward.[4]

The sale, use, and production of Christian images flourished during the rise of the Catholic Church but later fell out of favor during the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation when their role and value was harshly challenged as part of an initiative to purify theology and practice. John Calvin especially was hostile towards even the most simple of visual representations of faith, including plain crosses, whereas Martin Luther arrived at what some see as a more balanced perspective, which was the allowance of simple religious imagery in churches as long as the congregation was properly educated in their symbolic nature. Nevertheless, iconoclastic initiatives resulted in the destruction of religious art across Europe.

Protestant trends in art were later directed to more "secular" forms, including landscape, through which, without particularly imaging the divine, its existence could be hinted at. To this day, Protestant churches tend to be much more sparse in both architecture and decoration than Catholic churches, a result of the Reformation's careful consideration of the role of visuals. In the nearly five centuries since, little theological debate has focused on image use. However, beginning in the latter half of the twentieth

century, secular scholarship in the field of rhetoric—the study of how texts persuade us—turned its attention towards the power of visual texts in particular to shape beliefs and actions. A body of work emerged that offers a lens for the church to turn a critical eye towards this contemporary trend, especially in the image-driven world of social media.

Understanding the history of the Protestant church's relationship with images alongside scholarship in visual rhetoric teaches us several important points about our contemporary social media moment that might be appropriately applied to our own image use online:

Images can be used for good or ill, for misrepresentation as well as truth. Martin Luther, in response to more extreme iconoclastic efforts during the Reformation, wrote that, ultimately, "Images, bells, eucharistic vestments, church ornaments, altar lights, and the like I regard as things indifferent." By this he meant that *all* images—secular or sacred—have the potential to serve both good and ill purposes. The ultimate determinant is the projected impact on the viewer, which is a matter of knowing one's audience.[5] In other words, no image is neutral.

Rhetorical scholarship supports such a claim. Roland Barthes, a pioneer of visual rhetoric, notes that "general opinion…has a vague conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning," but he goes on to argue that images convey meaning just as thoroughly as text and often more efficiently.[6] Thus, a focus on discrimination when selecting texts to share on social media should not be optional; each image argues *something*.

Images can be misused as rhetorical shortcuts where a more thorough argument is called for. Consider the way commercial advertising functions: by creating an attractive image—say a beautiful woman with perfectly shiny and voluminous hair. The viewer is asked to make the leap from what is presented visually—perfect hair—to a cause—the shampoo advertised. True logic—logic that reflects a clear and sensible thought progression—is thus circumvented. There is no effort to explain how or why the shampoo is capable of producing such a result; viewers are simply asked to trust the designer. This was the fear Reformers had about images: they would be worshiped uncritically rather than contemplated appropriately. We are moved emotionally but not necessarily or even primarily intellectually by images.

In the case of religion, where the actual transformation of a set of values, lifestyle, and ideology are at stake, the importance of intermediary steps in logic should not be underestimated. This is the trap of "easy-believism," the stereotype that plagues evangelical Christianity and is never preferable to catechism into faith with plenty of time and room for potential Christians to consider all nuances and complexities. Christianity in particular, as a religion of the "Word," gives primacy to oral or text-

based argumentation; nevertheless, rhetoricians like Dr. J. Anthony Blair point us to the fact that "visual arguments are not distinct in essence from verbal argument" and may be used ethically if a considered approach is taken.[7]

Finally, the messages conveyed through images should not be a replacement for building real, connected, and dialogue-oriented relationships with others. This applies in particular to images used for evangelistic purposes. Study after study shows that the most effective evangelism takes place primarily via long-term relationship building and that the conversion process for an individual involves a period of, on average, two years of consideration.[8] Thus, images intended to convict or press an immediate conversion decision are likely not as impactful as we might imagine and, in fact, risk oversimplifying the message.

Ultimately, then, what approaching social media with a mind toward rhetorical effectiveness does is push one toward understanding a command such as that banning idolatry with more nuance. In particular, idolatry need not exclusively refer to a golden calf or even more metaphorical referents such as relationships or hobbies to which one is too attached, but might also encompass visual texts that do not appropriately serve an ethical purpose. The argument images make has the potential to be quick and powerful but also cheap and facile, a distinction that should be applied with incision to the adoption and use of visuals for religious purposes on social media. —*Amber M. Stamper*

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NOTES

1   Kurt Wagner, "Facebook Has a Quarter of a Trillion User Photos," Mashable, September 16, 2013, http://mashable.com/2013/09/16/facebook-photo-uploads/#V6qZupgz1Eqa.
2   Evan LePage, "A Long List of Instagram Statistics and Facts (That Prove Its Importance)," *Hootsuite*, September 17, 2015, http://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-statistics-for-business/.
3   Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
4   Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2000).
5   Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. William R. Russell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 30.
6   Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," *Image—Music—Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
7   J. Anthony Blair, "The Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33 (1996): 23–39.
8   Dave Bennett, *A Study of How Adults Become Christians with Special Reference to the Personal Involvement of Individual Christians* (dissertation, University of Sheffield, 2002).