The power of a picture: How Protestants imaged the gospel

by Mark U. Edwards in the January 25, 2005 issue

In last year's election campaign we were reminded that images can overpower words. The U.S. military prohibited the taking of pictures of flag-draped coffins arriving from Iraq even as it freely shared statistics on the number of American dead. It knows that the images are more powerful than the numbers. Digital photographs from Abu Ghraib prison provoked an outcry that written complaints were unable to elicit. Campaign commercials offered images intended to attract or repel, all in the service of selling a candidate or discrediting an opponent—irrespective of any policy position actually taken or advocated.

Images work at a nonconscious level. Research shows that TV ads—whether negative campaign commercials or advertisements for a brand of toothpaste—influence viewers' attitudes even if viewers insist that they do not. A critical voice-over on network news that discusses a campaign ad's many misrepresentations is cheerfully accepted by the commercial's makers because they expect the images to overpower the critical commentary.

Protestants are inclined to underestimate the power of images in religion. Yet at the founding of Protestantism and in its early decades its leaders were very much aware of the power of religious images and did all they could either to remove the images entirely—the iconoclasts' solution—or to recast them in a way that exalted word over image.

In his masterful tome *The Reformation of the Image* (published last year by University of Chicago Press), Joseph Koerner explores how the Reformers met this challenge. The focus of his study is Lucas Cranach the Elder's 1547 Wittenberg altarpiece. In the predella, or bottom border, it shows Martin Luther preaching Christ crucified to his Wittenberg congregation; in the triptych's left wing, Philipp Melanchthon baptizes an infant; in the right wing, Johann Bugenhagen exercises the power of the keys in confession; and in the center panel, Jesus feeds a morsel of

bread to Judas (reception by the unworthy!) while Luther, shown as one of the 12 and depicted as Junker Georg, receives the communion cup from a servant, who shows considerable likeness to Cranach, the artist.

In late medieval Catholicism, images were used by the faithful to develop the disposition to act in a Christian fashion and the aptitude to do so well. They were employed and championed as tools for increasing Christian virtue. The crucifix, for example, could serve as a focus for meditation on Christ's sacrifice for our sinfulness and help the devotee cultivate the virtues of humility, gratitude, and identification with Christ's suffering on behalf of the world. The crucifix was, then, an idol not to the devotee but only to the iconoclast; the idolater, Koerner declares, is a "fictive foe."

The Protestant alternative to smashing images was using them to depict belief. Consider the Wittenberg altarpiece. Luther stands in the pulpit with his left hand laid upon an open book of scripture and with the right gesturing to a central crucifix. The Wittenberg congregation faces the crucifix (and Luther) and responds in prayer. The crucifix to which Luther gestures and the congregation responds appears, as it were, within quotation marks. It represents the *message* drawn from scripture, not the utterance that conveys that message—and that message, Luther insisted, whether drawn from the Old Testament or the New, always points to Christ crucified.

The good news of the crucified Christ as Luther understood it, and as depicted by Cranach, is both present and removed. It is present as the content of all scripture (it does not matter where scripture is opened under Luther's left hand) and it is the (pictorially literal) undergirding for the sacraments depicted in the surmounting triptych. It is simultaneously removed in the *theologia crucis* and *deus absconditus* of Luther's theology and in the uncertain mooring, unworldly lighting and aesthetic blandness of Cranach's painting. These images and actions are but visible, embodied signs of an invisible promise—"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (It is worth pointing out, as Koerner does, that a depicted crucifix is itself an image of a negation, simultaneously an icon and an iconoclasm, an image of God that violates all expectations about God, "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles.")

The deliberate crudeness of Cranach's crucifix functionally resembles the strategy employed by modern newscasts when they show campaign commercials inside an

obviously fictive TV set. Both strategies serve to give the viewer distance on the image, to remind the viewer that the image is to be seen *as image*, not as reality.

Koerner asks of the Reformation images the same postmodern question we ask of campaign (or consumer) commercials in the 21st century: less what they *mean* and more what they *do*—and in whose interest? As historians have long recognized, the meaning of the Wittenberg altarpiece is straightforward, if intricate: its images are visual summaries of confessional statements such as the Lutheran Augsburg Confession. But what do they do?

In answering this question, Koerner explores the equivocacy of images and (largely futile) attempts to nail down an image's meaning by means of verbal gloss. Luther famously claimed that scripture interpreted itself, but just to be sure he fitted out his published Bibles with introductions, glosses and theologically informed translations to guide the self-interpretation.

In their own way artists followed suit, offering in their altarpieces (and other woodcuts and paintings) images of the Lutheran church that attempted to interpret themselves, sometimes to the point of providing explanatory captions alongside textually derived images. In these glossed altarpieces the church that preaches the word truly and celebrates the sacraments rightly sees a self-interpreting depiction of itself preaching the word truly and celebrating the sacraments rightly. This public depiction encourages its members to behave as depicted, to conform internal conviction to official confession.

We moderns tend to view religious images and symbols (and associated rituals) as representing an inner state of belief that precedes the image, symbol or ritual. These beliefs could also be expressed—as they were in the confessions of the 16th century—verbally and, relatively speaking, unequivocally. This is a quintessentially Protestant understanding—one that has shaped much secular analysis. Yet images, symbols and rituals can move us and shape us at nondiscursive levels; they can impart feelings, understanding and aptitude of which we literally cannot speak.

Luther, Koerner reminds us, appreciated the power and even necessity of embodied communication. Both the predella and the triptych give visual expression to Luther's deep conviction that God, who is hidden and invisible, accommodates God's self to our finite and fallen nature by revealing God's disposition toward us through material things: in the incarnation, in the sacrament and in the Good News of scripture received, above all, through hearing (a material reality, but not visual, to

be sure). The altarpiece is an embodied, material, visual communication of that embodied, material communiqué.