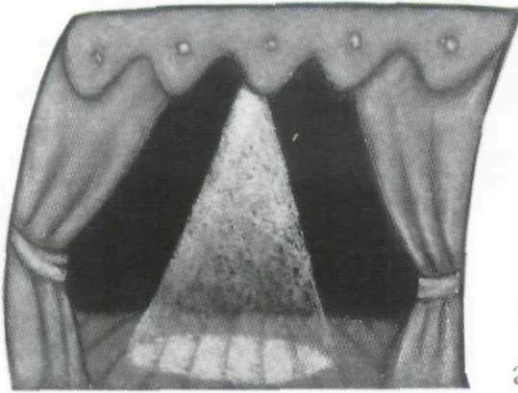


# Let There Be Light

by Tex Sample



The worshipful energy in many services can be transformed by a more faithful and artful use of light.

My friend, Joel Ferrell, works professionally in theater. One day I asked him about the importance of lighting in the theater. "In the theater I would rather have lights than scenery," he said. This conversation led me to further study and to a growing realization of how inadequately we usually address lighting in the church.

Hardly anything is more intimidating than to write a few paragraphs on light and its use. A wonderful book by Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), displays the rich story of light as it has played out in the work of scientists like Galileo, Copernicus, Planck, Einstein, and Hubble. Zajonc also reviews the ways that the religions of the world understand the place of light in their relationship to God and/or ultimate issues.

My effort here is much more humble: What are basic uses of light today in theater, concerts, and other public events, and what can we learn from these for the worship of the church?

### Lighting as the Glue

Richard Pilbrow's book, *Stage Lighting Design: The Art, the Craft, the Life* (New York: Design Press, 2000) is arguably the best resource we have on stage lighting design. He names the integrative role of lighting, stating that lighting is "the glue of a production." It "joins all elements of the production together and thus helps to underline for the audience the full emotion and meaning of the play."

I think here of the capacity of light to serve the flow of worship, to move with the mood of the liturgy, and to indicate transition. It can prevent ruptures in the worship and enhance the focus and the holistic character of the liturgy.

### Properties of Light

Pilbrow names four properties of light that can be controlled and used in stage lighting.

### Intensity of Lighting

The first property is intensity, the brightness of light. How a light appears can be more important than its wattage. A single light bulb on a darkened stage can appear quite bright while a 1,000-watt light can seem dim in a highly illuminated setting. Intensity is a function of changing light and the degree of its illumination.

I wonder here about church sanctuaries where the intensity of the lighting seldom changes over the course of an entire worship service. What is communicated at a subliminal level when the lighting of celebrative music about God's glory is the same as the lighting of music that characterizes confession?

Some services have a sameness that does not serve the liturgy and is hardly active praise and worship of God. No case is being made here for lighting as a panacea, but it is a resource. My suspicion is that the worshipful energy in many services can be transformed by a more faithful and artful use of light.

Pilbrow points out that visual perception, understood as the illumination needed to see stage objects clearly, varies in terms of color, the reflective capacity of an object, its size, and the distance of a spectator from the scene. The bigger the auditorium and the farther away the back rows, the greater the illumination required.

Some churches lack sufficient illumination. Careful examination of what is going on in a sanctuary in terms of lighting is a worthy study. What objects, for example, are central in the liturgy? What events or actions need special illumination? Is the illumination commensurate with the importance of the liturgical moment?

In the church we do know the power of the candle and its enormous capacities for setting mood and providing an illuminative context for worship and prayer. On many occasions it is just right. There are those times when anything more than candles is too much. At the same time, we may have too much confidence that the candle is enough.

In a culture where lighting is an indigenous practice in theater, in concerts, and in a host of settings of shared celebration, the church's attention to such matters is a basic form of pitching tent.

### Color of Lighting

Color on the stage is a function of the color of the light, the colors of the objects, and the impact of these on the eye. Color can provide emphasis and change or embellish the pigment in dress and background or other objects in a performance. New lighting technologies offer great freedom in uses of color, but Pilbrow argues that the basic purpose is "to enrich the visual and emotional atmosphere of the stage."

Pilbrow instructs that different colors serve different purposes. The yellow-green zones of the middle of the color spectrum help us see more clearly than those of the red and blue ends. Color also affects mood. Comedy uses warm colors and tints; tragedy works with cool or strong colors. Moreover, color is a powerful instrument for engaging the imagination.

Here, too, the church has much to learn. For example, what lighting serves best the dark wood furniture, altars, and backgrounds of many sanctuaries? Against these backgrounds what happens to the cross in its illumination or the communion table or the pulpit? What is the role of lighting in the display of the colors of vestments or robes? If a worship service is held in a room other than the sanctuary or a building other than that of the church, what consideration is given to the color of the lighting? These are not merely ornamental considerations, but relate to the substance of liturgy and its rich sensory experience.

### Distribution of Lighting

The form and direction of light are the concerns of distribution. The right light from the right angle is central to good lighting.

I am sometimes in a church where the minister and other liturgists seem to blend the background. You can see them, but they don't stand out. After a time, it becomes "work" just to keep focus, and unless the action or the sermon is good, one's attention begins to waver. In my studies of light, I learn that the theater uses side lights and top lights to prevent exactly this kind of blending of a performer into the background. A light at a forty-five degree angle from the front is not enough. I seldom see this kind of attention paid to lighting in the church.

### Movement of Lighting

The coming of moving light to the stage is a revolution in illumination. The use of moving lights opens a new opportunity for lights to imitate sound, especially in their rhythmic capacity. The percussive use of lighting provides new ways to integrate sound and the visual.

We need to exercise care here. I do not want to suggest some tacky use of moving and beat-sensitive light in worship. I do not want a service to look like twinkling saloon lights. At the same time, moving and percussive light that coheres with and serves the liturgy and that embodies the mood and the flow of worship is an expressive form of response to God.

### Five Aims of Stage Lighting

Pilbrow also examines five objectives of stage lighting.

#### Selective Visibility

The first objective is selective visibility. Pilbrow instructs, "The cardinal rule is: Each member of the audience must be

able to see clearly and correctly those things that he [or she] is intended to see."

It is key that audiences not have to strain to see. Such strain leads to weariness and then loss of attention. Under light, objects show up differently. White objects appear brighter than dark ones, thus requiring specific illumination. Different skin tones need different lighting consideration. Action calls for a variety of uses of lighting. Achieving balance in these settings is, of course, an important skill.

In one sense, this is a suggestion that people simply need to be able to see the liturgy. Yet, it is more than this – it is to see the liturgy more fully. It is to make prominent what is of central importance. It is to move the focus to the central act or event of the liturgy at any given point in the service. Further, it is to evoke the mood and the response appropriate to a liturgical act.

#### Revelation of Form

The second objective of stage lighting is revelation of form. If objects are to be seen rightly in three dimensions, shade and shadow become as important as light. Analogously, I think here of the role of negative space in the art of painting. Artists learn that negative space requires its own special attention. So it is with darkness and shadow.

These concerns are key to liturgy. Imagine an evening service during Lent in which a large cross is hung from the ceiling as the center of the congregation's attention. Then think through the role of light and the direction and shape of the shadow of the cross. The music then picks up the theme of cross and shadow, perhaps with "Beneath the Cross of Jesus."

#### Composition

Composition is the third objective of stage lighting. Pilbrow says that lighting is "painting the stage with light." It also needs to be said that as important as a compelling visual stage is, it must not be achieved at the expense of what should be rightly and clearly seen.

By negative example, I think of church settings where altar, pulpit, and chancel are simply areas of a glaring sameness. Lighting offers a great diversity of compositions which fit the liturgical year, the different occasions and flows of the structure of worship, appropriate frames and settings for the preached word, and the centrality of the Eucharist. I appreciate the care and sensitivity many worship committees bring to the decoration and display of the altar. Lighting is a way of creating a wider composition of this kind of care and sensitivity.

#### Creation of Mood

The fourth objective is the creation of mood. Mood is in great part a consequence of selective visibility, revelation of form, and composition. In lighting worship, mood is the artful and faithful result of the integrative and imaginative

use of selective visibility, the disclosure of form, and “painting” the chancel, the altar, the sanctuary, and, most important, the liturgy.

Let me say here, too, that there is a movement in some churches to treat the congregation as an audience. Consequently, the congregation is kept in the dark through a good deal of the service. I regard this as a major mistake. The congregation is not an audience but a community of faith, enacting the liturgy. Lighting the community of faith, then, as the embodiment of the liturgy is central to the encompassing purpose of the service.

### Conveying Information

Finally, lighting conveys information. Pilbrow observes that in today’s world, theater “tends often to speak in short-hand.” That is, scenes jump from one to the next in contemporary drama. Lighting enhances this storytelling process by the ways it conveys changes in time and space. *Information* is not an entirely adequate word for what Pilbrow addresses here, especially in the wider uses of light to inform the audience of what is coming.

Several years ago at a Christmas Eve worship service, each member of the congregation lit a candle in a completely darkened sanctuary while singing “Silent Night.” It was a powerful and moving moment. As the song ended, however, all the lights came on and the music moved abruptly to an upbeat rendition of “Amen! Amen!” It was a jarring rupture of mood. The sensitive tone and atmosphere of “Silent Night” seemed confronted with the glower of headlights. It took awhile for the congregation to recover and join in the wonderful lyrics of “Amen! Amen!” Think what a difference a good transition could have made here, especially in the use of light to close the one song and prepare for the next. Lighting could have formed a transitional move from the experiential peace of that night’s gift to a response of celebration.

### Lighting the Liturgy

I recently spoke in a church that had spent \$125,000 to redo the lighting in the sanctuary. I set up a computer, projector, and screen only to discover that the bright lights of the sanctuary were focused directly on the screen. I asked them to turn off these specific lights. I was told that it could not be done – all the lights had to be either on or off.

Similar stories with light occur again and again in my work with congregations. Very seldom do I find a church that thinks first of lighting the liturgy. Almost every guideline of lighting design noted above is violated in the majority of churches. We need a new sensitivity to the role of light in Christian worship and witness. I do realize that most churches cannot afford expensive

lighting. The issue, however, is not how much one pays, but how thoughtfully, imaginatively, and worshipfully one uses light

In conclusion, my point is not to consider how we can work lights to manipulate people – it is how lighting can serve the integrity of worship, how lighting can serve the rhythm and flow of the liturgy, and how lighting can intrinsically serve to glorify and praise God.

Some years ago, I spoke of the role of light, but apparently I was much too cautious in my claims. Afterward a student said: “Tex, you just don’t get it, do you? You don’t understand that in the twenty-first century electronic light will be as important in the church as the candle has been throughout the past two thousand years.” Perhaps this is an overstatement, but it is a word the church needs to hear.

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## Resources on the Aesthetics of Lighting

- Drew Campbell, *Technical Theater for Nontechnical People* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999).
- Richard H. Palmer, *The Lighting Art: The Aesthetics of Lighting Design*, 2d edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1994).
- Richard Pilbrow, *Stage Lighting Design: The Art, the Craft, the Life* (New York: Design Press, 2000).
- Graham Walters, *Stage Lighting Step-By-Step: The Complete Guide on Setting the Stage with Light to Get Dramatic Results* (Cincinnati: Betterway Books, 1997).

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