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What Has Romans to Do with Flickr?: Imag(in)ing the Apostle Paul

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The Apostle Paul lived in a world full of visual media. From inscriptions to monuments, the ancient world was a bonanza of sights. Our students today also live in a world dominated by visual media. From websites to television, our digital screens are powerful vistas into an ever-changing world.



And yet my students so often encounter the letters of Paul as plain text. It is difficult to recreate the multi-dimensional experience of hearing Paul's letters read in a house church in the middle of a jostling city. It is difficult to help students imagine the visual realities that attended the lives of these Pauline communities.

But it is just as difficult to help students imagine how these texts take flesh in communities of faith today. It is just as difficult to help equip them to use various kinds of media in their teaching, preaching, and leading in worship.



So, instead of lecturing on the too frequently neglected closing chapters of Romans, I assign groups of students a particular section of these texts. Their assignment is to search on Flickr for three pictures that illustrate, capture, and/or illuminate their assigned verses. The pictures have to be available under a Creative Commons License, (Download Creative Commons on Flickr instructions) which is an initiative meant to encourage artists to share their work with others. These are pictures whose creators want their work to be used under the rules of open-source access. A pdf with step-by-step instructions I hand out to my students is available here. The first time I tried this assignment I was struck by the creativity exhibited by my students. With a limited amount of time to discover their pictures, they created fascinating connections between the images they chose and Romans. For instance, one group drew visual parallels between Paul's exhortation of Christian communities in Romans 12 and comic book superheroes. At the same time, some groups made rather rigid connections between the text and their images. Books and clouds and



church building dominated some presentations. In the future, I will have to discern how to push students beyond easy or trite visual connections to the text at hand.

What are my hopes with this assignment? First, I want to invite my students to think about how they might teach and preach the biblical text using visual media, a vital ministerial skill in this era of digital interaction. Second, I hope to encourage students to be creative and thoughtful in their conceptualizing of Pauline theology. Last, I want students to engage with the Scriptures beyond the epistemological and methodological constraints of writing assignments.

So, does it work? I think so though the assignment needs some tweaks, of course. In the end, this was one small way to connect two worlds dominated by visual media.

<https://wabash.center/2013/11/what-has-romans-to-do-with-flickr-imagining-the-apostle-paul/>