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# To Proclaim, to Instruct and to Discipline

## The Visuality of Texts in Calvinist Churches in the Dutch Republic

*Jacolien Wubs*

## 1 Introduction

Texts inscribed on decoratively framed panels or painted within ornate cartouches on church walls became a common feature of Dutch church interiors after the Reformation. After the defacement and removal of much of the liturgical furnishings and art of the late medieval Catholic church interiors, initially during the 'Beeldenstorm' of 1566 and more systematically following the takeover of churches by the Calvinists in the last quarter of the sixteenth century, text decoration became a common means in the redecoration and refurbishment of church interiors. While a significant number of text panels and text paintings have been preserved in Dutch churches, their scholarly treatment was thus far fragmentary. This study set out to systematically inventory and analyze extant text panels and text paintings in Dutch Reformed churches dating from ca. 1575-1800. It examines the nature and function of text decoration in the context of the adaptation of formerly Catholic churches for Reformed use in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Firstly, this thesis describes the nature of text panels and text paintings as conveyers of a textual message, and as ornate objects or images of texts; two features that may seem contradictory in the context of the Dutch Reformed church interior from which images were banned to make way for the preaching of the Word. By highlighting the 'visuality' of texts displayed in churches, this study amends the more traditional idea of the Dutch Reformed church interior as a space where hearing the Word completely replaced seeing the image.

Secondly, this study explains the function of text decoration in the Reformed appropriation and adaptation of church interiors, which were until then outfitted for late medieval Catholic worship, to meet the requirements of Reformed worship and doctrine. Texts painted on walls and panels provided instructions for the Reformed liturgical use of church space, especially for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and served as visual and textual markers of the Reformed identity of the church space.

While the historiography of the Reformation is dominated by a narrative of major change, the consideration of forms of continuity is a common thread throughout this study; it highlights the mani-

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festations of the late medieval Catholic roots of Reformed churches in the pictorial motifs alongside inscriptions, the selection of texts and the distribution of text panels and text paintings in church space – without negating the very profound impact of the Reformation on the doctrine, practices and material outfitting of churches.

The history of the Revolt and the emergence of the Dutch Republic and of the Reformation is the historical context in which the takeover of medieval Catholic churches in the Northern Netherlands and the transformation of their interiors took place. Between c. 1575 and 1600, almost all medieval Catholic churches in this area were taken over by the Calvinists. While extant text panels and text paintings dating up to 1800 are taken into account, the emphasis of this study mainly lies on the period between ca. 1575 and 1650; the majority of the material dates from this period, and this early phase is the most dynamic phase in the Reformed transformation of church interiors. The large majority of the included text panels are preserved in churches and the text paintings on church walls inevitably so. The discussed museum pieces are exceptions. The scope of this study is not limited to Dutch Calvinist churches. It considers the particularity of Dutch Calvinist text decoration in a wider North Sea-context; the study concludes with a comparative exploration of forms of text decoration in churches belonging to the various Protestant confessions that emerged around the North Sea in the course of the sixteenth century.

## 1 A text landscape: the variety of texts and the use of Reformed church space

The first chapter provides an overview of the entire ‘landscape of texts’ that arose in churches after the Reformation, ranging from mundane house rules to communion texts that point at the Lord’s Supper as the most important sacrament celebrated in Reformed churches. This chapter describes various types of text panels and text paintings categorized by the content of the displayed texts. The different types of text decoration point at various forms of usage of Reformed church buildings and to the diverse community of users that was connected to a church. Many of those usages were not new after the Reformation, but were continuations – adapted to a greater or lesser extent – of pre-Reformation practices. The inscriptions of various kinds provide insight into the (degree of) adjustment of practices across the Reformation. After the Reformation, churches continued to be public spaces to which a broad and diverse community felt connected. This community consisted of a minority of professing members (in Dutch: *lidmaten*) of the Reformed church and of supporters that favored the Reformed religion without being official members of the church (in Dutch: *liefhebbers*). Supporters of other Protestant denominations such as Mennonites and Lutherans, adherents of ‘the old faith’, as Catholics were referred to, and people without a clear religious affiliation could also belong to this community, and could enter the church for different purposes, varying from an indoor stroll during rainy weather to remembering their dead buried in the church. This local community of which the members were in

some way connected to the church was also diverse in other respects: it consisted of magistracy and craftsmen, nobility and the poor, women and men, and adults and children.

The first section of chapter one provides an overview of types of texts that point at the functions of the church space other than as the place for Reformed church services and the Reformed celebration of the sacraments. A few panels with very practical ordinances survive. Such house rules were aimed at maintaining a degree of order and decorum in churches, and were required by the public function of churches for the entire local community: such house rules forbade running and shouting in the church, as well as throwing stones – rules that seem targeted especially at the younger church goers – , letting cloth dry on the church yard, or herding cattle to the market through the church during the Sunday service. The church and the church yard remained the site of burial after the Reformation, not only for adherents of the Reformed faith but for the broad community. Ordinances for burial inscribed on panels and displayed in churches provide insight into the practices of burial after the Reformation. Inscriptions on panels that call the church goers to give their alms for the benefit of the poor (and particularly for the benefit of the Reformed poor) show the ideology and practices of Reformed poor relief. Panels of which the inscriptions recall the history of the church and the town are discussed under the subheading "History and identity". Many churches possess text panels that recall the history of the church building, which is presented as a symbol of local identity and pride. In the overview of the memorable events in a church's past on history panels, the Reformation is often presented as a decisive turning point – for the better. The verses on history panels often also relate dramatic events of the history of the Dutch Revolt, which was recent and living history for the people who witnessed the installation of such panels in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Text panels that represented craft guilds, noble families or individuals point at the function of a church as 'social arena'. Text panels commissioned by craft guilds are often among the most ornate panels in a church, and were inscribed with a compilation of Bible verses that mention the craft of the particular guild. Local nobility in rural areas and magistracy in town churches had their coats of arms depicted alongside pious texts. Such text panels replaced pre-Reformation objects that had a representational function in the church, such as side-altars with altarpieces adorned with donor portraits. However, ritual practices connected to those altars, such as votive masses and processions performed on feast days, ceased to exist after the Reformation. Memorial text panels with Bible verses became the successors of late medieval epitaphs with figurative imagery, and were part of the more extensive ecclesiastical material culture of death and memory.

The second section of the first chapter focusses on texts of a profoundly religious nature that were closely related to the use of the church space for Reformed worship. This section presents an overview of the Bible verses and other (catechism) texts and common combinations thereof that occur on text panels and in text paintings. The Ten Commandment panel takes up a central position in this section – as it did in many churches – being the most often occurring type of panel and in many ca-

ses the largest and central element in an ensemble of texts that further consisted of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, and in some cases the Words of Institution of the Lord's Supper. This section can be read as an introduction to and reference section for the upcoming chapters, in which the focus is narrowed to text panels and text paintings that are related to the use of churches for Reformed worship.

## 2 Scripture turned into images

Protestantism, and Calvinism in particular, aimed to be a religion of the Word. Scripture was the only source for true faith, and faith was by hearing; church services increasingly revolved around the sermon, and the celebration of the sacraments had to be embedded in thorough preaching and teaching. Reformed doctrine strongly rejected images of saints and the depiction of God in a human form. Such images would only misguide the faithful and lead them away from worship of the invisible God, who was impossible to truly depict. Catholic ritual practices in which images and objects played a role were rejected as idolatry. Images and Catholic church furnishings were defaced and removed during the infamous 'Beeldenstorm' of 1566 and lesser-known iconoclastic riots in the years thereafter. An enduring, more systematic process of rigorous removal of images and of objects connected to the Catholic Mass, such as altars, altarpieces and sacrament houses, followed after the take-over of churches by the Calvinists in the last quarter of the sixteenth century. It is therefore not surprising that the notorious image of the Dutch church interior after the Reformation is that of a serene space with whitewashed walls, bereft of imagery and centered around the pulpit. However, the idea of the Dutch Reformed church interior as a space in which seeing and the image were completely supplanted by the hearing of the Word is somewhat of a stereotype, partly shaped by Reformed ideology so strongly centered on Scripture. It is an image that has become iconic through the famous but also to an extent idealized seventeenth-century renderings of Dutch church interiors by Pieter Saenredam and his colleagues.

In line with more recent research that focusses on Protestant material and visual culture as an integral part of the Protestant religion rather than as its by-product, the second chapter foregrounds the 'visuality of texts'. This chapter argues that text decoration was an innovative form of visual culture: Scripture itself was turned into images in order to speak to the church goers in a visual manner without transgressing the doctrinal limitations of visual display in Calvinist churches. The chapter demonstrates the visual nature and function of text decoration through an analysis of all the formal elements of text panels and text paintings – from the inscriptions to their decorative frames with and without figurative images. The stylistic and iconographic characteristics of text decorations are interpreted in the context of the Protestant discourse on religious imagery and of art historical developments outside of Calvinist churches in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Inscriptions were rendered in an ornate manner: they were carefully calligraphed in gothic lettering – a font that was associated with pious content – and adorned with decorative initials. Conventions from manuscripts and printed texts, such as the application of 'rubrication' in red, can be recognized in the inscriptions on panels and walls. The use of gold for inscriptions evokes notions of holiness and divinity; pre-Reformation tradition prescribed the use of gold to signify sanctity, for example in the depiction of halos of saints. Texts were framed in classicist 'aedicules', which visually added to their status, or with decorative scrollwork in the then fashionable manner of Hans Vredeman de Vries. The display of the Ten Commandments in particular was distinguished by its design: the traditional shape of the two stone tablets of the law made the image of the Ten Commandments recognizable at a glance, as if it were a symbol. Such qualities of text panels and text paintings support the idea that text decorations were primarily meant to be viewed – rather than read – and served as instructive signs for the liturgical use of the church (as is further elaborated in chapter 3) and that their careful, meditative reading was secondary to that.

Inscriptions were usually not decorated with images of human figures or narrative scenes, and images on frames and alongside texts were usually not related to the content of the displayed texts – with the exception of the tools and products of the craft guilds on their text panels, which are discussed in chapter one. A more remarkable exception are the Ten Commandments panels with an image of Moses. A number of Ten Commandments panels were adorned with an image of Moses, sometimes accompanied by Aaron, and in a number of cases depicted together with the Old Testament scenes of the presentation of the law on Mount Sinai and the worship of the golden calf. The image of Moses on Ten Commandments panels together with these Old Testament stories has its origin in a late medieval iconographic tradition. The popularity of the depiction of Moses and the Old Testament stories in which he is the main character increased with the Reformation. In the Dutch Calvinist church interior, the portrait of Moses appears in a few versions and with a very limited variation of Old Testament stories to serve as background scenery. This limited iconographical variation was a consequence of the relatively strict Calvinist understanding of the image prohibition. The context of the Reformed church interior determines the interpretation of the depiction of Moses and the accompanying Old Testament stories on Ten Commandments panels: they can be understood as a warning against what the Reformed saw as idolatry.

## 3 The display of texts as part of the transformation of the church interior for Reformed worship

Chapter three examines the function of text decoration in the appropriation and transformation of church space to accommodate Reformed worship. In this chapter, the original spatial setting of (ensembles of) text panels and text paintings is reconstructed, in order to gain insight into the relevance of text decoration for the Reformed liturgical use of the church. This is a key chapter in this study; only

in the spatial and functional context of the church interior, the textual, material and visual properties of text panels and text paintings can be fully understood.

A Ten Commandments panel is the most common type of text panel, and was often the main part of an ensemble of texts that further comprised the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles’ Creed, and in a number of cases also the Words of Institution of the Lord’s Supper, as is described in chapter one. Such ensembles of text panels centered around the Ten Commandments played an important role in the transformation of the chancel, from the former site of the Catholic Eucharist – of which the theology was strongly rejected and its practices disqualified as superstitious – to a place suitable for the celebration of the Reformed Lord’s Supper. Typically, Reformed text panels filled the voids left by removed Catholic images and liturgical objects: a Ten Commandments panel often replaced a Catholic crucifix or calvary group on top of a chancel screen and communion texts were placed at the site of the removed high altar at the east end, or at the former location of the tabernacle at the north side of the chancel.

**Figure 1.** An ensemble of text panels with the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed (1624) is placed on the chancel screen in the church of Noordwijk-Binnen (South-Holland). Photo: Archive Regnerus Steensma.

The displayed texts provided instruction for the celebration of the Lord’s Supper: seeing the Ten Commandments reminded church goers to examine their own conscience and faith before deciding to partake in the Lord’s Supper, in accordance with the call for self-examination in the liturgy of the Lord’s Supper. Situated on the border of nave and chancel, the Ten Commandments marked a spatial and spiritual threshold communicants had to cross; only the admitted professing members of the Reformed church who assessed themselves worthy would enter the chancel to partake in communion. The Words of Institution, which were often displayed within the chancel space, had to remind communicants of the biblical origin and meaning of the Lord’s Supper – different from the ‘idolatrous’ Catholic Mass that used to be celebrated at that same site. Usually, the Lord’s Supper was celebrated only a few times a year. Outside of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the text panels were a permanent

material and visible reminder of this most important sacrament of the Reformed church. Even though the chancel was no longer regarded as the 'holy of holies' within church space, the placement of text panels in and around the chancel shows that its special status was to some degree retained throughout the Reformation.

The display of Reformed texts served as visual markers of the Reformed identity of the church, and underlined a break with the Catholic past of the church and especially with its past use for the Catholic Mass. Particularly in the first decades after the take-over of churches by the Calvinists, there was an urge to a shape a contrast with the still recent Catholic past. This is not surprising considering the diverse community of users of a church, which also included those who held on to the Catholic faith, who were attached to the church building precisely because of its Catholic past, and who preferred to continue their Catholic ritual life there – and sometimes tried to do so clandestinely. However paradoxical, the placement of texts often accentuated the pre-Reformation interior organization of church space; precisely those sites within the church interior were marked by texts where Catholic objects and furnishings had been removed. This shows that the functional and compartmentalized structure of the pre-Reformation church interior remained to some degree intact. The analysis of the spatial setting of text panels and text paintings demonstrates that the Reformation of the church interior involved the adaptation of an existing situation rather than radical change or total renewal.

## 4 Unity and diversity: the use of text decoration by Protestant confessions around the North Sea

Unity and diversity are the central issues of the fourth chapter, which explores the forms and functions of text decoration in churches that belonged to the various Protestant confessions around the North Sea. In the course of the sixteenth century, the Reformation broke up the unity of the late medieval Catholic church. It brought an end to the considerable degree of uniformity of the doctrine, the liturgy and interior outfitting of churches in northwest Europe. A variety of Protestant confessions emerged around the North Sea; a Reformed form of worship came to characterize the Church of England after the break with Rome, Lutheranism was introduced in the Danish Kingdom (which encompassed present-day Denmark and Norway) in 1537, and Lutheranism in northwest Germany and especially in East Frisia was impacted by the presence of Calvinism, partly due to the influx of Dutch Calvinist exiles after the repression of Protestantism in the Low Countries after 1566. The North Sea can be viewed as both a natural barrier that separated these regions and a connection between these regions that enabled exchange. The visual display of texts was used in the re-formation of church interiors across these denominations and regions, and text panels or text altarpieces and text paintings are preserved in churches around the North Sea in considerable numbers. For these reasons, a 'North Sea-perspective' is ideally suited for the contextualization of the Dutch Calvinist material.

In all regions, the display of texts was especially used in the transformation of the chancel space to accommodate the celebration of the Protestant Lord's Supper. This highlights the universal importance of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which was commonly celebrated in the chancel. It also shows a universal Protestant desire to visually mark a break with the Catholic Mass at the former site of its celebration. In the comparison of the forms and spatial setting of text decorations, a dichotomy appears between Lutheran and Reformed churches. This is mainly due to the different degrees of change in the outfitting of churches that the Reformation brought about in the Reformed and the Lutheran realms. The Lutheran Reformation of churches in Denmark and Norway was characterized by a higher degree of conservatism; usually, the altar at the east end was retained. Inscriptions were added to controversial images on retained pre-Reformation altarpieces to adjust their meaning. The winged altarpieces decorated mainly with catechism texts and made to replace a Catholic altarpiece were a particular Lutheran invention, alien to Reformed churches in which altars no longer had a place. The profound 'purging' of English churches was comparable to that of Dutch churches after the take-over by the Calvinists; virtually all medieval altars and their decorations were removed. The texts, designs and typical placement of Ten Commandments boards installed in English churches in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries bear many similarities to their Dutch equivalents. East Frisia in Germany stands out as a particularly fascinating region in this respect; the presence of both Lutheranism and Calvinism resulted in exceptional forms of text panels and text altarpieces. The particular ways in which those were integrated in ensembles of church furnishings often reflect both Lutheran and Calvinist principles and ritual practices.

## 5 Conclusion

Protestantism aimed to be in every way a religion of the Word. Images were rejected and banned from churches, as they would merely lead the faithful astray, to make way for the Word as the only source of true faith. However, hearing the Word did not supplant the seeing of the image. Turning the Word into an image was an inventive way to resolve the seemingly contradictory nature of Word and image after the Reformation; it was a way to engage the church goer in a visual way without transgressing the boundaries of the Protestant image prohibition. The Word was displayed in churches to proclaim Reformed faith and to mark the Reformed identity of the church, to instruct on Reformed doctrine and worship, and to discipline the behavior of church goers.