

## Seeing the Truth: The Use of Visual Illustration in Preaching

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### Abstract:

A major trend in contemporary preaching is the use of visual tools to illustrate truth: props, backdrops, video, and so on. This paper will discuss the emerging use of such tools, suggesting strengths and weaknesses and ideas for future development. Examples will be shown during the paper's presentation.

When J. Grant Howard wrote his book *Creativity in Preaching* (Zondervan) in 1987, he had the foresight to include a final chapter on "Creative Use of Visual Aids in Preaching." What did he propose? He suggested that preachers make occasional use of object lessons and projecting appropriate pieces of clip art using an overhead projector. Let's not be too tough on Dr. Howard, however; in 1987, that wasn't too far from state-of-the-art technology.

As we all know, the world has changed since 1987 (even if some of our sermons have not). Particularly in the past decade, the use of visual imagery and tools has exploded into the church in a remarkable way. Anyone who questions that should consider this fact: look at a church sanctuary or worship center that has been built in the last ten years. It may or may not have a pulpit, but it is almost guaranteed to have one or more projection screens installed.

This significant increase in the use of visuals in preaching has not gone without its critics, but the purpose of this paper is not to debate the validity of the visual trend or to discuss word vs. image. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to consider what is happening in the churches, why it is happening, and suggest some issues for future conversation.

Allow me to raise one other explanatory note: although this paper will talk about the use of visual tools in preaching, that is done with full recognition that the revolution in which we are engaged is multisensory, not simply visual. Many of those who are influencing this homiletical trend make it clear that they do not simply want their listeners to hear the sermon; they want us to see it, feel it, taste it – to experience the sermon in a way that would leave previous generations of preachers scratching their heads in wonder.

There is little question as to the culprit in this issue of the increasing influence of visual media: television. As TV and film critic Michael Medved has pointed out, "The average American spends 26 hours a week in front of a television set . . . that would be 13 years, uninterrupted, 24 hours a day, over a normal life span."<sup>1</sup>

Today's pervasive TV culture is a relatively new phenomenon, as Barbara Mraz observes:

Though television today shapes many aspects of our lives, in the early 1950's it was a luxury item, present in only the more affluent households. It was a time of three channels and two colors. Previous to the Fifties, a longer workweek made leisure time a meaningless concept. As the early Fifties wore on into the mid-Fifties, the forty-hour work-week made it possible for even the average family to gather around the TV in the evenings and watch their favorite shows. Daytime TV was filled with soaps, children's shows and game shows. . . .

Daily use of TV in all types of American households averages seven and one-fifth hours a day. In homes with teenagers under eighteen, the average viewing time is fifty-five hours weekly, or about seven and four-fifth hours a day. The Nielson rating system in 1999 reported this.

"Nearly every household (99%) has at least one television. Three-fourths (75%) have several sets, and more than half of American students have a television in their bedrooms. TV has become as indispensable in the home as a bathtub or a refrigerator, and probably garners much more attention than either of those appliances. Furthermore, the public's fascination with TV now extends beyond the home. A recent Neilsen (1998) survey found that about twenty-three million Americans watch TV when in restaurants or bars, and more and more are watching TV in airports, hospitals, and other public places. Television is now the main source of news, information, and entertainment for the overwhelming majority of Americans."<sup>2</sup>

Of course, today the television must compete for our attention with another visual medium: the personal computer. Yet another medium which is a powerful influence – particularly with teens and young adults – is video gaming. (In fact, the video game industry now is larger than the movie industry in terms of annual sales.) We look, we watch, we interact – often with multiple media simultaneously.

That is why Alan Nelson writes, "Although we can sit around and discuss the theoretical benefits of solemnity, solitude, and slowing down, the bottom line is that it's getting more difficult for people to do only one thing at a time. When they try, they feel that life is passing them by. When they come to church to watch the equivalent of a talking head lecture for twenty to forty minutes or more, it's probably one of the most adrenaline-deprived moments of their week. Mind-wandering, fidgeting, grogginess, and feelings of under-stimulation run rampant in today's church audiences."<sup>3</sup>

In the face of this powerful cultural reality, much of the contemporary church has responded with a sincere effort to become more visual. That a visual emphasis has engaged the contemporary church almost goes without saying. According to Wilson and Moore in their book *Digital Storytellers*, "One study in the secular audiovisual industry

asserts that over 75 percent of churches in North America have purchased or are planning to purchase technology systems in the coming year. The typical system costs around \$10,000 and consists of a screen, a projector, a computer, and a videocassette and/or DVD player.”<sup>4</sup> (That percentage makes sense if you assume it includes only those churches with full-time pastors – about a third of the total churches in the U.S.)

Many of those churches now investing in such technology are caught up in a “corporate presentations” model, which essentially involves the use of software like Microsoft PowerPoint to create a succession of images that consist “of a number of textual, aural, and visual elements tossed together in a PowerPoint document, with little sense of design and zero sense of story or experience.”<sup>5</sup>

In some churches it is as simple as projecting announcements before the service and the words of songs and hymns during worship; in others, the screen may be used during the sermon to project an outline or key phrases. In some large congregations, the screen is used for image magnification of the preacher during the sermon, so that people who sit far away from the front can see the facial expressions and gestures of the preacher. And in an increasing number of churches, the screens will be used to project a film or video clip that helps illustrate the worship or sermon theme; the clip will typically be used just before the sermon or some time during the sermon where a traditional illustration would have otherwise been used.

So we are faced with the reality that the generations which have come along since the Baby Boomers are visual in orientation. They grew up on television, they mark the stages of their lives by memorable movies, and now they spend hours each day in front of a computer monitor. They want to see truth, not just hear it.

### **Can illustrations be visual?**

Preaching is an inherently oral medium and most of us who preach have been taught to think in oral and literary terms. Yet we are trying to reach a generation that tends to think in images and story, a generation that is visually oriented. If you are preaching to a typical congregation, you will be speaking to a combination of learning styles. As a result, preachers are increasingly thinking strategically about communicating truth using a variety of methodologies, including visual ones.

In the book *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, Richard Mayhue points out that illustrations are used “to enlighten or make clear.” He notes several purposes for illustration, including (in part): “to interest the mind and secure the continuing attention of the audience; to make our preaching three-dimensional and lifelike; . . . to communicate convincingly to those who respond better to pictures than to facts; to ensure that the message is unforgettable; (and) to involve all the human senses in the communication process. . . .”<sup>6</sup> It would not be difficult to make the case that illustrations presented in a visual format could effectively accomplish those purposes – in some cases, more effectively than many illustrations presented verbally.

In his book *Using Illustrations to Preach With Power*, Bryan Chapell argues for the superiority of illustrative material such as parables and allegories, as opposed to items like “figures, analogies, and examples . . . (which) do not involve listeners to the same degree as do true illustrations.” According to Chapell’s definition, “Illustrations are ‘life-situation’ stories within sermons whose details (whether explicitly told or imaginatively elicited) allow listeners to identify with an experience that elaborates, develops, and explains scriptural principles. Through the details of the story, the listener is able imaginatively to enter an experience in which a sermonic truth can be observed.”<sup>7</sup> Once again, it is possible that many listeners will be able to more readily “enter an experience in which a sermonic truth can be observed” if the sermon utilizes visual illustration as well as the spoken word.

Allowing for the strategic use of visual illustration does not require that it be used in every sermon, any more than one would use a “football story” in every sermon (though I have known preachers who have attempted the latter). Indeed, in an interview with *Preaching* magazine, Ed Young, Jr. – whose use of visual illustrative material would rank him among the most avid practitioners – insists that the key to effective illustration is not flash and dazzle, but being unpredictable in your communication, to avoid loss of audience interest resulting from slavery to predictable patterns. He says,

“Sometimes it can be as small as changing the time when you speak, or it can be maybe one time giving a message outline or message map and then one time you don’t do it. Maybe it’s having the choir or your praise team singing in one area in the church one weekend and another area another weekend. Maybe it’s using video clips for two straight weeks and maybe it’s not using it for six weeks. Maybe it’s being very loud and having all the lights for three or four weeks, and maybe it’s totally dialed down, totally simplistic for four straight weeks. So the church should be consistently inconsistent because the higher the predictability the lower the connectivity.”<sup>8</sup>

While they are not the only ones we could discuss, let’s consider two major visual methodologies which are becoming more and more common as illustrative tools in contemporary preaching: the use of film/video clips and the use of props and sets.

### **The Video/Film Clip as Illustration**

For many years, preachers have used visual media as sermon illustrations; they have just described those media in words, rather than displaying the actual images. It is not at all uncommon to hear sermon illustrations based on television shows, movies, comic strips, even paintings – all visual media. Why do we think it is acceptable to describe such images, but not to show them?

Over the past five to ten years in particular, there has been a significant increase in the use of video and film clips as part of worship and preaching – not simply among innovative mega-churches (which have always tended to be first adopters of new methodologies), but also among small to mid-size congregations. In a July 2004 survey

sponsored by the *Preaching Now* newsletter, 60 percent of respondents expressed interest in using new strategies for reaching different generations, with many citing video and film clips as part of their own new approaches. What was interesting about that survey is that 90 percent of participants were from churches of less than 500 members, with 55 percent from churches of 199 members or less.

Part of the reason for this growing interest is technological; as costs for equipment have declined, video has become a more realistic option for more churches. Another factor is also, in part, technological; with the availability of information via the Internet and other resources (such as mega-church sponsored conferences), smaller churches are increasingly knowledgeable about the techniques and resources used by larger congregations, and many of those smaller churches are using their larger cousins as methodological models.

An additional factor in the use of video and film clips is the wide range of video resources that are now available. For example, with films now available via DVD within a few months of their theatrical release, film clips are now accessible quickly and easily. Even more important, an increasing number of multi-media services and websites are now being launched for the purpose of providing visual images and video for use in worship services. In 2005, for the first time, *Preaching* magazine included a survey of nine sources for quality video productions developed specifically for use in worship and preaching, and that list is now far from comprehensive. One website, [www.sermonspice.com](http://www.sermonspice.com), has been developed as a “broker” on behalf of a wide range of video producers; a pastor can go to the site and browse more than 400 videos by topic or genre (testimonial, dramatic, comedic, etc.), see a preview, and download the video (typically for a cost range of \$12-\$20 each).

There are helpful resources available that suggest different film clips to go with different themes. Group and Zondervan both have books that suggest video clips for various themes, with other publishers no doubt entering the arena as well.

How are these clips used in conjunction with the sermon? One approach is the used of video to introduce the theme of the message, get the attention of the listeners, and prompt their thoughts on the issue at hand – in other words, video is sometimes used as a sermon introduction. For example, in the congregation where I worship, the pastor used a video clip that combined a coordinated sequence of images from television programs about families. In each clip, someone was coming home. After about a minute or so, he began his sermon about “coming home” to God’s family. The video clip established the subject and got the attention of the listeners – essentially, it became the introduction to the sermon, much as a pastor might have told a story in another sermon.

Video clips are also used as illustrative material within the sermon. Rather than verbally relating an anecdote or even describing a scene from a film or television show, the pastor comes to the appropriate part of the message, then pauses as the video clip is projected onto the screens. Unlike using video as an introduction – where the clip or short film

might be as long as four or five minutes – the illustrative video clip is typically two minutes or less.

[During the presentation of this paper, participants will have the opportunity to see several examples of video productions which have been developed specifically for use as sermon illustrations.]

To paraphrase a maxim of previous pastoral generations, these days the preacher has his Bible study software in one hand and his DVD in the other.

### **Use of Props and Sets as Illustration**

An additional trend in the use of visuals as illustrations is the place of props and sets as object lessons and reinforcement for the truth statements of the sermon.

The use of props is certainly nothing new. As the Lausanne Occasional Paper on “Media and Technology: observes, “The media was widely used in biblical history. Noah used the Ark, Moses used the staff, Nehemiah used the city wall, Jesus used mud for healing the blind and God used the rainbow, the dove and the cross. The media has been a symbolic means to signify spiritual meanings in the past.”<sup>9</sup> Yet in the church in recent generations, few preachers made significant use of props apart from the occasional object lesson during the children’s sermon.

That is no longer the case, as preachers have begun to regularly use a variety of physical objects, and even theatrical-type sets, as an integral part of the sermon.

Rob Bell is pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan. One Sunday he gave out thousands of pieces of modeling clay, so that each person in the congregation was holding his own clay as Rob preached on the principle that we are God’s workmanship, God’s artwork. In a sermon about Esau and Jacob, he discussed the episode in which Jacob stole his brother’s birthright for a bowl of soup. As congregants entered the service that day, they were handed a cardboard bowl as a personal prop to hold during the message. (At one point, Rob suggested they could make notes on their bowl.)

Rob says, “I’ll try any method to get you thinking, feeling, touching, and smelling. I want to assault as many sense as possible. So I’ll be doing something with a prop, then I’ll read a text, then I’ll go back to the prop, then I’ll tell a story, now back to the text, now back to the screen. I want to work off of many different surfaces.”<sup>10</sup>

Ron Martoia is Pastor of Westwinds Community Church in Jackson, Michigan. Once a month they do a special Encounter service where they touch the senses in order to create a spiritual experience. For example, when they wanted to talk about having a “thirst” for God, they created a mock “desert” using more than a ton of sand, complete with cactus. To deal with spiritual hunger, they displayed food commercials on TVs around the room,

and put fresh-baked bread, cookies, and pizzas around the auditorium. Ron explains, “It smelled great. People began salivating. After 20 minutes we asked, ‘How can we provoke spiritual hunger at a salivating level?’ Suddenly, people realized, I don’t salivate like this for spiritual things at all.”<sup>11</sup>

In his book *Refining Your Style*, Dave Stone (of Louisville’s Southeast Christian Church) offers several examples of “outside the box” sermons. In one sermon, Andy Stanley gave out money to every church member and challenged them to see how God could multiply their efforts. Kyle Idleman, a young preaching associate at Southeast Christian, filled the platform with street signs, then moved from one to another discussing the meaning of each one. Rick Rusaw (LifeBridge Christian Church, Longmont, CO) set up crosses at various spots around the sanctuary, and during the service he invited people to go to one of the crosses and nail to it pieces of paper on which they had written their sins. Dave Stone preached a sermon on parenting while “moving from room to room in a makeshift home built onstage.”<sup>12</sup>

The master of the use of props may be Ed Young, Jr., pastor of Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas (suburban Dallas). Since founding Fellowship in 1990, Ed has led the church from its original 150 members to a weekly attendance of more than 18,000 people. Fellowship Church has been characterized by creativity in worship and preaching, and now the church is sharing its resources with others through its Fellowship Connection network and CreativePastors.com.

Ed regularly uses props or contextual settings to establish the theme of the sermon and/or to illustrate a point in the message. Talking about marriage and the family, Ed has a young couple come onto the platform with him, complete in formal wedding attire; when he started talking about the progression of family life, they were joined by a playpen. In a series on spiritual warfare, Ed spoke from an actual British Scorpion tank which had been driven onto the platform. (In an interview for *Preaching* he explained, “To do that we had engineers to measure how much weight our stage could take – just being able to pull that off and the turret and how to do that and how I can get in the tank and climb up on the tank.”<sup>13</sup>) He also did a series on dating (RPMs – Recognizing Potential Mates) in which each Sunday saw a different fancy sports car used as a backdrop for the message. (The attendance at Fellowship is as much as 50 percent singles, so many of the message series deal with marriage, sexuality, and issues that connect with young urban single adults.) Often the props are quite simple. For a message on communication called “The Table,” the setting was a simple table and chairs.

Like Rob Bell, Ed has also utilized illustrative material that was placed in the hands of the listeners, creating both a visual and a tactile experience. For example, they handed out small packages of lifesavers to each person during a message on evangelism, and asked them to keep the package in their pockets until the person they were working with came to faith.

Another time, in a message about tithing, he handed out packages of Skittles “to everyone to communicate the fact that everything we have is from God. I told the story about the

time I bought my daughter a bag of Skittles, which she then refused to share with me. She didn't understand three things: I bought them for her; I could take them away from her; and conversely, I could take my credit card and buy so many Skittles for her she wouldn't know what to do with them. It's the same with God. He entrusts all of us with some "Skittles"—some a small pile, some a medium pile, some a big pile—and he merely asks that we give back to him a portion to help finance his work in the local church. Any size church can use an illustration like that.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite his own reputation for creative innovation, Ed stresses that,

Creativity is not bouncing off the walls. It's not gimmicky. It has to be biblically-driven. We're not above the Bible or on the same level as the Bible. We're under the Bible – we're under scripture. So it has to be Biblically-driven. And I believe when its biblically-driven you're going to find that sweet spot of communication.

I think that small tweaks take us to giant peaks in communication. It doesn't have to be these big honkin' things and flying down from the ceiling or painting the walls orange and throwing sand in the foyer. It's within your context and sometimes it can be as small as changing the time when you speak, or it can be maybe one time giving a message outline or message map and then one time you don't do it.<sup>15</sup>

As Rob points out, when we talk about being visual what we are really doing is trying to engage the senses in understanding and responding to truth. We are used to connecting with the listener's sense of hearing, but in today's culture it is even more effective if we can engage their other senses. If we can help them see as well as hear, there's a greater chance that more people will begin to understand God's truth for their lives -- and that's the first step to changed lives.

The use of visual tools for illustrating the message involves more than simply discovering clever and entertaining ways to distribute information. Postmoderns hunger for experience and community and connection. As a result, part of our creative challenge as preachers is to find ways to satisfy that hunger while creating a context in which the Holy Spirit will draw them into an encounter with Jesus.

### **Cautions and Issues for Further Conversation**

One caution for us in the use of images as major elements of preaching is that, as Quentin Schultze says, “we do not live in an *image-savvy* culture. We must contend with an *image-saturated* yet largely *image-ignorant* society. Our lives are *image-intense*, and undoubtedly movies and commercials have an enormous impact on young and old alike. But at the same time we are not very astute about how images communicate”<sup>16</sup> (italics in original).

Even as we face such a culture, we must be cautious not to use images in a manipulative way. Powerful images can have a strong emotional appeal, and it is possible to use them

in a way that can manipulate the behavior of our listeners, just as earlier generations of preachers might have used a “tear-jerking” story. As Bryan Chapell observes, “Where there are illustrations there are showmen, and where there are showmen there are charlatans.”<sup>17</sup> What is true of verbally-presented illustration is just as true of visual; indeed, the potential for emotional connection may require us to use even more caution in the careful selection of material to avoid manipulation of our listeners. Nevertheless, the potential for abuse does not preclude the validity of properly-selected and used illustration, verbal or visual.

Another caution is that preachers can become enamored of visual tools and use visuals when they may not be the most effective illustrative tool for a particular situation. As Ed Young points out, “If the visual does not stand alone then throw it out. If you have to explain the visual too much it’s a sorry visual. Some people force visuals.”<sup>18</sup>

Many evangelical churches have begun to project the scripture passage on the screen as the pastor reads it prior to the sermon. While this seems like a positive step, since our church members will often arrive at church with a dozen or more different translations of scripture – one person has the New International Version, another the New American Standard Bible, and so on – there is an unintended consequence. Where this is the practice, people start depending on the screen and they quit opening their own Bibles to read along with the pastor. As a result, they don’t have those Bibles open to follow along during the sermon, and something important is lost in helping people learn to read and understand God’s Word. So even as we use projections of the text, if we are serious about guiding people into the truths of God’s Word, we must be careful to encourage people to open their own Bibles, or provide page numbers for where the text can be found in the pew Bibles.

In his excellent book *High Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely*, Quentin Shultze offers some helpful guidance to churches considering the use of such technologies. He reminds us that: “Our technological assumptions are deeply cultural. It is right to want worship to be relevant to the people of God; it is entirely different to assume that worship must reflect the technological biases of a particular culture, whether it is high-tech or high-touch.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, we must be careful not to let the technology tail wag the dog; use technology where it strengthens communication and enhances the worship experience, not simply to be cutting edge or to keep up with the church down the street.

Finally, allow me to suggest some topics that will require further conversation within both the academy and the community of Christian preachers in coming days:

- Within the academy, it will be important to introduce this issue of visual illustration into the study of homiletics. Those theological institutions which learn to do so effectively will provide their pastoral graduates with an important communicative tool as they begin their own ministries.
- As many innovative churches “push the envelope” in attempting to find new and fresh ways to communicate biblical truth, how do we determine where to set the

parameters of appropriate methodology so that young ministers will have a sense of where to “draw the line” in their own preaching.

- One of the methodologies Ed Young, Jr., has emphasized as a key to innovative communication is the use of a team-process in sermon development. (See his article “Communicating with Creativity” in the May-June 2005 issue of *Preaching*.) A video produced to demonstrate the work of the sermon-planning team at Fellowship Church is the best-selling resource provided by the Creativepastors.com resource site. With increasing interest in this approach, we must be prepared to deal with ministerial students interested in this model – either to teach them ways to implement the approach in their own congregations, or to discourage its use (with appropriate explanations). And for those of us who were taught in an earlier generation, we may have to consider this model with fresh eyes.

### For Further Reading

Tex Sample, *Powerful Persuasion: Multimedia Witness in Christian Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005

Quentin J. Schultze, *High Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004

Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Digital Storytellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002

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<sup>1</sup> “Media Critic Laments TV’s Growing Influence,” *The Virginian-Pilot*, Sept. 18, 1996.  
<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/VA-news/VA-Pilot/issues/1996/vp960918/09180439.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Mraz, “Burma Shave To The Beatles: Television Media Influence in the Golden Age.”  
[http://www.unm.edu/~abqteach/media\\_cus/01-04-06.htm](http://www.unm.edu/~abqteach/media_cus/01-04-06.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Nelson, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Digital Storytellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Mayhue, “Introductions, Illustrations, and Conclusions,” in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, edited by John MacArthur, Jr. (Dallas: Word, 1992), pp. 247-8.

<sup>7</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach With Power* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> “Preaching Creatively: An Interview with Ed Young, Jr.,” *Preaching* magazine, January-February 2005, p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Media and Technology*, Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 48, 2004. Edited by Wing Tai Leung.  
[http://community.gospelcom.net/lcwe/assets/LOP48\\_IG19.pdf](http://community.gospelcom.net/lcwe/assets/LOP48_IG19.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Stone, p. 214.

<sup>11</sup> “Immersion Experiences: A Conversation with Ron Martoia” *Leadership*, Winter 2004, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Dave Stone, *Refining Your Style* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2004), p. 210

<sup>13</sup> “Preaching Creatively,” *Preaching*, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> Ed Young, Jr., “Creative Tensions,” *Leadership Journal*, Winter 2005

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<sup>15</sup> “Preaching Creatively,” *Preaching*, op. cit., p. 9

<sup>16</sup> Quentin J. Shultze, *High Tech Worship? Using Presentational Technologies Wisely*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004. pp. 20-21.

<sup>17</sup> Chapell, p. 25.

<sup>18</sup> “Preaching Creatively,” *Preaching*, op. cit., p. 57

<sup>19</sup> Shultze, p. 18.