

## Metaphor: The Most Common and Complex of the Homiletician's Tools

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### Abstract

The goal of this paper is to enable us to better understand and more effectively use metaphors and metaphorical speech. This will be done by summarizing and evaluating what some modern rhetoricians say about metaphor, then applying those concepts to evangelical homiletics.

### Metaphor: The Most Common and Complex of the Homiletician's Tools

In building sermons that show our congregations the truth of Scripture, we must understand the most common and complex of our tools: Metaphor. The goal of this paper is to enable us to better understand and more effectively use metaphors and metaphorical speech. This will be done by summarizing and evaluating what some modern rhetoricians say about metaphor, then applying those concepts to evangelical homiletics. Hopefully, we will be able to make effective use of metaphors in our own preaching and glean pedagogical assistance for the classroom in order to do a better job of "Showing the Truth."

The amount of material on this subject is vast; a 1971 bibliography included more than 300 pages and as many as four thousand titles (Black, p.19). Needless to say, one could spend a lifetime studying metaphor. This massive amount of literature on metaphor is indicative of its importance as a rhetorical concept. This extensive literature illustrates that it is also very common. I. A. Richards calls metaphor the omnipresent principle of language (p.92). One can hardly write three sentences without using metaphor. Even in this paper, I count four thus far. Perhaps, this is due to my frequent travel on the road of communicating abstract concepts. Richards goes on to say that thought is metaphoric. Lakoff and Johnson flesh out this concept in *Metaphors We Live By* in which they give a dozen of examples of categories of metaphors that influence much of our language and thought. Metaphors shape how we think about things. "Time is money" expresses in numerous ways the words we use with both time and money: spend, invest, budget, profitability, cost, use, use up, have enough, give, lose (p.9). We not only use these words for time and money, we think in this way about both. While not wanting to digress into the subject of how humans think, the point is that metaphor is part of the way we communicate. It is not just extra color we put into our homiletical paintings to make them aesthetically pleasing. Metaphor is not a rhetorical spice to make unpalatable theological concepts easier to digest. Metaphor is an indispensable part of language.

Though metaphors are common, they are also complex and difficult to understand. Is metaphor an efficient and effective vehicle to clarify the truth or is it a risky polysemous agent with multiple meanings that clouds or even distorts the truth? Metaphor is viewed in both ways, and depending upon the communication context, either could be true. Pastors know that water is an

inadequate metaphor for the Trinity, but we still say (with qualifications) that just as water can be a liquid, a solid and a vapor and still be water, so too, God can be the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and still be God. To the precise theologian this illustration is an anathema because it presents a metaphor that can lead to the heresy of modalism, but to the camp counselor trying to explain the Trinity to an inquiring ten-year old mind; it is a welcomed, though inadequate explanation.

Some would go beyond this traditional understanding to say that metaphor not only shows the truth, it is the truth. Saying “God is a rock” creates an emotional and visual image that would seem to carry far more truth than does the more literal, “God is dependable.” This metaphor is not only showing the truth of God being dependable like a rock, it goes on to present truths that are difficult to put into words. That is why a metaphor is used; it presents a more complex meaning than the normal meaning of the words. John Searle describes the complexity of metaphor well:

“It is a special case, that is, of the problem of how it is possible to say one thing and mean something else, where one succeeds in communicating what one means even though both the speaker and the hearer know that the meanings of the words uttered by the speaker do not exactly and literally express what the speaker meant” (p.92).

Before looking at the theory, it seems appropriate to reacquaint ourselves with metaphor. It is commonly defined as a comparison between two things without using like or as. Writers often broaden the field of meaning to include simile, extended metaphor, analogy and other figurative language. Though these are distinct literary categories, they all compare at least two subjects and thus share the benefits and pitfalls of associative language. Aristotle defined metaphor in his *Poetics* as movement of an alien name from species to genus or vice versa. He puts a name on something that does not belong. A ship cannot stand, and yet we speak of a ship standing at harbor (*Poetics* 21.7). A web site from Purdue University nicely summarizes two modern rhetor’s definition. Kenneth Burke: a device for seeing something in terms of something else. John Searle: understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another (OWL, 1).

Metaphors can be extended past a comparison of two words to the comparison of two word pictures. “The pastor sprung into the pulpit and released all his pent up tension upon an unprepared congregation.” This metaphor is extended and indirect. The pastor could have been compared to a coiled spring, but rather the indirectness was seen in using “spring like” attributes to describe him. Metonymy is another form metaphors can take. This is the opposite of an extended metaphor. It is concise in that one word is substituted for another, with the original word only being understood, not spoken. We Baptists cannot bring ourselves to say “wine” during communion, so rather than say the bread and the wine, we Baptists say the bread and the “cup.”

Metaphors can die. The constant and consistent use of an image destroys the power of the image. We no longer think of a tree when we refer to a “branch” of government. Branch has taken on a meaning that includes a department of government. However, depending upon the context and the audience, a dead metaphor can be revived. With some extra effort, a speaker could refer to the branches of government becoming overgrown and in need of some pruning.

Preachers must remember that a dead metaphor no longer has the vivacity it once possessed. As the branch metaphor was expanded with “pruning,” such often used metaphors can be refurbished by extending them.

Metaphors can also be mixed, which in a sense is multiplying comparisons. A mixed metaphor makes a comparison and then adds another metaphor that uses a different image. The first comparison is set up and then a switch is made to a new image. “The sermon was planted in our minds like molasses on a hot day.” Here the change went from homiletics to agriculture which is fine, but then to cooking and meteorology. This metaphor is confusing because too comparisons were attempted.

Now that we have all too briefly surveyed the concept of metaphor, we can proceed to ask a difficult and yet crucial question: How does a metaphor work? What process do we use to make them work?

As far back as Aristotle, the parts of a metaphor were recognized. There is an initial object that is compared to a secondary object. Richards called these the “tenor” and the “vehicle” (p.96). He justifies his nomenclature by claiming that other names such as “original idea” and “image” are confusing. Whatever those parts are called, there must be at least two in order for a metaphor to exist. Let us call them “subject” and “image.” The question remains as to how we move from one to the other.

John Searle helps us with a three step process when interpreting metaphors (p.114). 1) The hearer must decide that a metaphor is being used. If the literal or normal meaning could not be true, then the author must not be speaking literally. A metaphorical interpretation is required. 2) How should I take the meaning? What are the things that both the subject and the image share? 3) I must limit or restrict the meaning because not to do so would result in the subject and image being equal.

Using the metaphor, “the boy is a pig”, the following is an example of how this process could work. Step one: the listener decides that the boy is not literally a pig. Step two: The listener must determine how the boy is like or related to a pig. Perhaps, the boy eats a great deal and is sloppy. Step three: But, the listener must be selective as to meaning, the boy does not have four cloven hooves and small curly tail. Although this shows us the process, it does not explain why it works.

Many suggestions have been offered as to why metaphors work. Andrew Ortony categorizes these into the Substitution theory, the Comparison theory and the Interactive theory, but qualifies his division noting that the theories are equally compatible and incompatible (p.10). Apparently he wants to give some structure to an examination of the various theories without being strictly bound to categories. Of these theories, the oldest is the simple Comparison theory, so, we shall look at it first. The most prevalent view today is the Interactive view, which will look at secondly, followed by the Substitution view.

## Comparison Theory

The Comparison theory has been around since Aristotle and is easily recognized. Simply stated, it sees metaphors as simile. The meaning comes when the listener goes through Searle's steps cited above and arrives at the meaning through taking characteristics from each part of the metaphor and describing how they best correspond to each other. Seventeenth-century rhetors, Blair, Campbell and Whately explained how metaphors work with this model. Blair states it eloquently:

There is nothing which delights the fancy more, than this act of comparing things together, discovering resemblances between them, and describing their likeness. The mind being thus employed is exercised without being fatigued; and is gratified with the consciousness of its own ingenuity." (p.142).

In this view the metaphor can be paraphrased to grasp its meaning. The image is put into literal terms and thus can describe the object without metaphor. "God is a rock" is paraphrased to mean "God is dependable and unmovable." This paraphrase conveys the same meaning as the metaphor. The purpose of the metaphor in this view is to add variety, interest and understanding, not new meaning. This view is the dictionary definition. While it is true to a point, the critics of this view see metaphor as being more powerful than mere comparison.

A literal paraphrase of a metaphor does not adequately convey the full meaning of the metaphor. When we say that the boy is a pig, we mean something more than just saying that the boy over eats; we want to convey feelings and emotions associated with pigs as well. Often these would be pejorative. However, a boy who has recently been sick and needs to eat a great deal would not be called a pig, because that is a negative term. In that case, pig would not be used because it carries negative connotations with it. Yet, we could use the term sarcastically and say that he is a *real* pig. Our intended meaning is that we don't think he is a pig, in the negative sense, but he is a pig in the sense that he does eat large amounts of food. The problem with the Comparison theory is that more seems to be happening with a metaphor than simple comparison. Those that have critiqued this view have developed another view.

## Interactive Theory

Searle states the Interactive theory when he says that a metaphor calls to mind another meaning that is found neither in the object nor the image (p.99). Peter Elbow echoes this when he speaks of a third part of the metaphor which is the meaning (p.32). Max Black shares this view and identifies it as the Interaction view (p.27). Paul Ricour agrees with this concept as long as it involves "new" metaphors and not those that have become flat. By flat, I assume he means what others have called dead.

In this view, the metaphor carries meaning of its own. This new meaning comes as the metaphor brings two subjects together and requires the reader to establish a relationship between them. In this process, a new meaning emerges that was previously undiscovered. Ricour states the view well:

“ . . . a word receives a metaphorical meaning in specific contexts within which they are opposed to other words taken literally; this shift in meaning results mainly from a clash between literal meanings, which excludes a literal use of the word in question and gives clues for the finding of a new meaning which is able to fit in the context of the sentence and to make sense in this context” (p.99).

Kevin Vanhoozer, with whom evangelicals will be more familiar, echoes this view:

“Unlike symbols, which are tied to things, metaphors are the free creations of discourse. The tension in metaphor is not something that occurs between two terms (e.g., “God,” “rock”) but rather the tension that accompanies two opposed interpretations of an utterance (“God is a rock”). The literal interpretation is absurd, and its very absurdity calls for a metaphorical interpretation. The association of ideas in a metaphorical statement is the result neither of induction nor deduction; neither scientific observation nor logical reasoning creates metaphors. Indeed, metaphor subverts logic; it has been called an “international category mistake” (p.129).

This Interactive view puts emphasis upon the context and the audience which guide the meaning and makes metaphor an event.

Allow me to present a situation that requires a metaphorical interpretation and then use this identification view to analyze it. When I was new in my present position, I asked an elderly colleague about his family. He referred to his “idiot son” in a Houston hospital. I recalled that my great aunt, back in the 50’s, referred to a relative, who was mentally handicapped, as an idiot. She meant no disrespect; to her, it was a simple description. I associated this elderly colleague with my aunt. I also thought that it was very early in a relationship to use such a harsh phrase as a metaphor. Thus, I understood that my colleague had a mentally handicapped son in a hospital. When I expressed a compassionate concern that comes from years of pastoring, my colleague revealed that his “idiot” son was a heart surgeon.

The son is the subject of the metaphor, the term “idiot” is the image, but the meaning is beyond the literal “brilliant doctor.” The logical absurdity that would demand a metaphorical interpretation was at first not apparent to me due to the context. Now that I understand the metaphor, it produces an experience that is beyond the words. Now when I ask him how his “idiot” son is doing, my meaning goes beyond the literal, “How is your son who is a doctor doing?” To articulate exactly what is being communicated in the metaphor is to misunderstand the Interaction view. The point being, the meaning of the metaphor cannot be communicated literally. In order to facilitate understanding of how the interactive view operates, let me try to spell out what the third element of this metaphor might mean. When the term “idiot” is used, it is as if I am saying that on the bottom of the intellectual ladder is the idiot, and on the top is your son. In a sense I am affirming his son’s intellect in contrast to others. There is also an element of shared humor with my colleague. I know facts about his son and our use of the word “idiot” is a type of code that we share. This increases our friendship. We could go on—but it must be remembered that the Interactive view sees meaning as being created by the metaphor and is distinct and beyond the meaning of the other two parts of the metaphor.

## Substitution Theory

A third theory is seen in the work of Donald Davidson. Others share this Substitution theory, but due to the limits of this paper, we shall only look at Davidson. He states rather bluntly that the interactive view is wrong (p.31). He sees the effect of metaphor as being distinct from its meaning. The meaning for Davidson lies not in the metaphor, but in the words themselves. Much of what the Interactive view calls meaning, he would see as the effect of metaphors. In metaphor, the word that is used as an image has within it meanings that which make the metaphor work. If the meanings were not there it could not work. If “God is a rock,” then rock must have the meaning of dependable and solid as well as the more physical meanings of rock. The word rock has extended meanings that make the metaphor work. Davidson states,

“I depend on the distinction between what words mean and what they are used to do. I think metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use. It is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences and depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of those words and hence on the ordinary meanings of the sentences they comprise” (p.33).

These three views are an attempt to summarize many writers’ view of metaphor. In summarizing them there are intricacies that have been lost or perhaps even misrepresented. But this summary can serve as a means to evaluate and benefit from these theories. I am not arguing for or against these views. It seems that when it comes to literature and communication theory, it is difficult to reject a view in total. Rather we shall now evaluate the strengths and limitations of each with the purpose being to improve our own use of this common and complex tool in our homiletics.

## Analysis

The more traditional view of metaphor as a comparison has the advantage of being a simple explanation that is easily understood. If a person does not accurately understand a concept, it is more difficult to use. While it may not describe all that a metaphor is or does, it is at least part of what happens, so it can serve as a model from which we can benefit. In preaching, it is almost second nature for a preacher to make comparisons. The important thing is that it is done and done intentionally. The process is straight forward. The subject of the metaphor is from the Bible, and the image is from the world of our congregation. The task is finding something in the congregation’s world that can be accurately and effectively compared to the Biblical concept. The idea of forgiveness has something in common with having a police officer give you a warning instead of a ticket. It is a simple binary process, something from column A goes with something in column B. There are conditions that govern our choices, but it can and should be done.

Hugh Blair, a fellow preacher and respected rhetorician of the nineteenth-century, gives us some guidelines to prompt us as we use the strengths of the Comparison view. Metaphors should be: 1) suited to the subject, 2) objects must not be mean or vulgar, but objects of dignity, 3) never jumbled, 4) never mix metaphors, 5) avoid crowding them on top of each other, and 7) they should not be too long (pp.142-143).

Understanding that making metaphors can be a simple process should spur us on to create them. Without the understanding of the process, a preacher may not take the step to ask how the truth of Scripture is related to other things in our congregants' lives.

A strength of the Comparison view is its simplicity, but it does not explain the power of metaphor. To the preacher striving for clarity, the comparison power of metaphors should be used but he should realize that more happens with a metaphor. Metaphor is not merely a simple comparison; it is a complex process in our minds. When a comparison is made, the preacher cannot control how far the comparison goes in the mind of the listener. Most preachers would follow Blair's advice to keep the metaphor appropriate, but this is difficult to know what is appropriate. Part of the strength of a metaphor is the unexpected association. How does one know when the metaphor goes too far? The image that the church is a "hospital" for those trying to get well, is acceptable, but to say the church is a "bar" where everyone knows your name is offensive, at least to the traditional mind set. Does the metaphor work? What meaning is gained in the listener? For some listeners this works wonderfully, but for others, the metaphor of a "bar" is beyond their rules. The only effect is that it makes the deacons think that their last pastor would have never said anything that offensive.

Black has an extended metaphor that can help us understand how metaphors go against the grain, but they can't go too far. He refers to language as being an "epichess" game in which a pawn can move like a bishop, or a knight like a rook, as long as the other player accepts it, and the mover can get away with it. Language has rules, and yet when we think of metaphor, those rules seem to be flexible but only to a point that is hard to define (p.23).

The Interactive view brings out the congregation's role in preaching. In order for a metaphor to work, the congregation must take an active role in interpreting. The importance of audience interaction goes back to Aristotle's enthymeme which he sees as one of the key elements of persuasion. An Enthymeme is similar to a rhetorical question which requires the audience to answer the question in their minds. So too the enthymeme requires the audience to supply a missing part of a statement or thought. The audience must participate. By allowing the audience to discover something for themselves, they are much more likely to respond favorably. There is a pleasure in presenting something to our congregations that asks them to contribute to the sense of what is being said. Understanding this will perhaps motivate us to do the hard work of creating metaphors that are fresh and affirm the congregation by assuming they can interpret it. Perhaps they could even come up with a significance that is unique to them: brought to them through the Holy Spirit's convicting work. Though it is far beyond the scope of this paper, it would be interesting to explore the role of the Holy Spirit and metaphor.

The assumption that the congregation can and will bring meaning to a metaphor is the strength of this view and at the same time points out a weakness. What a listener will do with a metaphor is limitless in this view. How many meanings can a listener conceptualize from a metaphor? If the meaning of a metaphor is up to the congregation, then the precise preacher would not use them at all, lest the meaning of the text never be accurately shown. Since Scripture is full of metaphor, it is obvious that God uses them in his communication to us and thus, we should use them in our communication. However, the preacher must be cautious in using metaphor because congregations bring their own meaning to metaphor.

Davidson's theory challenges the Interactive view. Metaphors do have meaning in themselves. Certainly, the context plays a part in the meaning of words, but the meaning still is linked to the word. This meaning, Davidson would say, is true for the metaphor. Metaphors mean just what they say—the meaning of a word has extended meanings and these extended meanings are used in a metaphor. A “run” on a bank uses the extended meaning of the word and is in many dictionaries as a possible meaning, but all extended meanings are not in the dictionary.

I recall a time when I took my teenage daughter to school. It was a depressing morning for her, and as we drove, a dazzlingly beautiful sunrise spread itself in front us. As I was comforted by the joy of what I was seeing, a metaphor from an old hymn came to my mind, which I used to encourage her: “When morning guilds the sky . . .” The dictionary nor her vocabulary listed “God” as an extended meaning of “morning,” nor a blend of clouds, dust particles and sunlight as a meaning for “guild”, yet, she was able to understand that the words meant “When God creates a beautiful sunrise . . .”

This theory encourages us that metaphor can be used to communicate in a more precise way than the Interaction view would lead us to believe. Metaphors do have meanings in themselves, and thus we should use them with confidence.

As one who enjoys and uses metaphor more often than perhaps I should, a word of warning is in line. George Chrissydes affirms the use of metaphor, but shows how it can be very harmful. He states that electricity is often illustrated with the metaphor of water. Just as the amount of water that flows through a pipe can vary according to the rate of flow and size of the pipe, so electricity can vary in rate and flow. Thus far, everything is fine, but someone learns that electricity is like water in a pipe and carries it too far, it could have disastrous results. When this person with his newly acquired “metaphorical” knowledge of electricity, sees a small electrical arch, “leaking” from a wire, he must not grab it and hold tight to prevent the leak (p.149).

Chrissydes' illustration is fictitious, but missionary Raymond Davis gives us a specific example of how metaphors can lead to wrong actions. A remote tribal people were introduced to the good news of salvation through Jesus and many of them embraced the forgiveness that comes through Him. Shortly after the new church was begun the political climate changed and the missionaries who brought the good news had to leave. They left behind a small church with tribal leaders and a copy of the Bible. After several years the missionaries returned and found a flourishing church that had a peculiar view of canines. They had previously had dogs as pets, but now they viewed having a dog as unchristian. When questioned about the basis for this belief, they said that the Bible warned them to be “careful of the dogs” (p.112).

In this case the author of the metaphor was not at fault, but due to improper training in hermeneutics, it led to beliefs that went beyond Biblical teaching. In this case the dogs bore the brunt of misinterpretation, but it affected humans as well. Even when metaphors have God as their author, they can be misunderstood. A common exhortation to preachers is to avoid language that is too academic or too theological. We are encouraged to bring the theological

concepts within grasp of the congregation. These exhortations lead us to metaphors, which can often help, but care must be given to use metaphors that lead to clarity and not confusion.

“To ask Jesus into your heart” is a metaphor rich with meaning. It speaks of a total willingness to let Jesus have the control of your life, or perhaps it is speaking of totally trusting Jesus, or then again it could be asking Jesus to become an intimate part of your life. This metaphor can be confusing, which is why for years I would not use it to explain how a person trusts Christ as savior. I felt it led people into an imprecise meaning of trust. However, this study of metaphor has changed my thinking about the use of this image. While I still feel it can be misunderstood if left without some explanation of its meaning, there is a power in it to communicate the holistic trust that a person must put in Christ. As a common comparison, I rejected its use, but as I understood the complexity of meaning associated with metaphors, it became apparent that the phrase can be used effectively.

This study of metaphors is somewhat like vivisection on an animal. To learn how a body functions requires observing the anatomy. Thus, every high school biology student dissects something. We look at the parts separate from the whole and in the process must destroy the living, functioning life. So to, taking apart a metaphor destroys it. Our goal has not been to codify how metaphor works or give six steps to better metaphorical use of language. Metaphors are hard to explain, but the more we examine them perhaps the more we will use them. I.A. Richards said that the lack of understanding about how a metaphor works does not keep us from knowing that it does work (p.117). When we work on the wording of a sermon, we will perhaps more quickly, more effectively and more accurately grab for the common tool of metaphor, even though we don't grasp its complexity.

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