

The Sermon as Illustration: Confirming Biblical Texts in Concrete Expressions

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ABSTRACT

An examination of the etymological meaning of the verb ‘to illustrate,’ David James Randolph’s concepts of concern, confirmation, concretion, and construction in preaching, as well as the concreteness of biblical texts reveals it is fitting to consider the sermon as illustration of the biblical text rather than the sermon merely containing illustrations.

Introduction

Illustration is often misconstrued as an auxiliary ingredient in the sermon or as a means of adorning the sermon. Consequently, preachers often use illustrations in their sermons like chefs use spice and garnish in their culinary art: to provoke flavor, delight, and a craving for the ‘substance’ of the meal.

David James Randolph, in his seminal book *The Renewal of Preaching*, captures a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning and function of sermon illustration than traditional homiletics texts. Randolph’s explanation of the concepts of concern, confirmation, concretion, and construction in preaching subtly advocates the sermon as illustration rather than the sermon merely containing illustrations.

Defining ‘Illustrate’ in Homiletics

The verb ‘to illustrate’ comes from the Latin *illustrare*, which means ‘to illumine’ or ‘to cast light upon.’ Henry Grady Davis accurately remarks, “Illustrate is a transitive verb. We do not simply illustrate; we illustrate something. There is no such thing as a ‘sermon illustration.’ There is only an illustration of some special assertion or thought in a sermon. There is no ‘good illustration.’ There is only a good illustration of – this or that.”¹

By far the most common depiction of the term ‘illustration’ is the famous image of a window. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, in *Spurgeon’s Lectures to His Students*, highlights English preacher Thomas Fuller’s image: “Reasons are the pillars of the fabric of the sermon; but similitudes are the windows which give the best lights.”² The idea is clear: “The chief reason for the construction of windows in a house is...to let in light.”³ The implication for Spurgeon, and for

many subsequent preachers, is that illustrations are to be used as subservient material to the rest of the sermon in order to shed light on an otherwise cloudy or unclear subject.

The term 'illustration' is commonly used in contemporary homiletics texts as an all-encompassing word for an assortment of technical names and categories of rhetorical devices employed to make the sermon more lucid.⁴ Homiletics texts position "life-situation stories,"⁵ word pictures,⁶ analogies,⁷ and explicit or implicit comparisons⁸ all under the umbrella of illustration.⁹ Long states, "Every imaginable sort of contemporary element in a sermon [is] called a 'sermon illustration' – stories, historical anecdotes, examples, word pictures, analogies from nature, and even persons presented as role models."¹⁰

The Function of Illustration in the Sermon

Homileticians generally adopt Fuller's 'window' concept for illustrations, believing the overarching function of illustrations is to shed light on a particular point, concept, or topic. Elizabeth Achtemeier suggests two key legitimate uses of illustrations in a sermon, namely "to make clear that which is being said" and to provide structure, or a variety of pace, to the sermon.¹¹ Other homileticians have proposed more thorough inventories of the functions of illustrations. J. Daniel Baumann suggests illustrations function for logical reason (i.e. as bridge builders in one's thinking), psychological reason (i.e. relaxing the congregation during sustained intensity), and emotional reason (i.e. humanizing concepts through proper emotion). Ilion T. Jones suggests preachers use illustrations in order to make the truth concrete, interesting, impressive, persuasive, and practical.¹²

Ian Macpherson, in his book *The Art of Illustrating Sermons*, recognizes seventeen functions of illustrations in sermons: to provide clarity to a subject; to promote persuasion; to bring the sermon to life; to adorn; to supply variety; to "help to keep the sermon as short as possible;" to repeat one's meaning without using the same words; to remain connected to the common things of life lest one's sermons become too heavenly; to preserve a suitable balance between the divisions; to make sermon transitions smooth; to aid memory; to create a reciprocal relationship between preacher and listener; to provide intervals of 'rest' in the midst of sermonic argument; to reinforce a point through indirection; to connect with listeners' emotions; to create appeal among one's hearers; and, above all other functions, to constrain listeners towards commitment to Christ.¹³

These, as well as other homileticians' lists of the functions of illustrations, point to an overarching purpose of illustrations: to serve as aids for making the content or 'substance' of the sermon lucid. Broadus contends, "Strictly speaking, one would not call illustration a distinct element of the sermon co-ordinate with explanation and argument, or with persuasion...Its function is solely auxiliary."¹⁴

Randolph's Concepts of Concern, Confirmation, Concretion, and Construction

In recent years, homileticians have refined their views about the function of illustration in the sermon.¹⁵ While many recent homiletics texts still assign an auxiliary service to illustration in the sermon, they also add that illustration makes the point. Yet, even this modification falls short of acknowledging the sermon as illustration of a biblical text.

David James Randolph¹⁶ elevated the function of illustration in the sermon by integrating illustration into the body of the sermon in such a way as to make it indistinguishable from and indispensable to the rest of the sermon. The symbiotic relationship between sermon and illustration is rooted in Randolph's explanation of four key concepts, namely concern, confirmation, concretion, and construction.

Randolph described concern as "that which engages the attention of the preacher, forms the basic material of the sermon, and corresponds to that which is usually known as the *subject* or *topic*."¹⁷ The preacher ought to creatively comprehend and share the Word of God, thus demonstrating that he has the concern of the sermon. The concern could be comprehended, according to Randolph, by searching for the biblical text's intentionality. Effective preaching carries forward the intentionality of the biblical text to the contemporary congregation by demonstrating where the action of the text intersects with the listeners.¹⁸

Concern also relates directly to the attitude of the preacher. The preacher, like the Old Testament prophet, is to demonstrate concern, an "existential involvement in the message proclaimed."¹⁹ Therefore, the preacher is to preach with passion, here understood as "compassion in the service of communication."²⁰

The biblical text ought to be understood in light of the preacher's as well as one's contemporaries so that the biblical text does not remain some "objective *thing* back there in history to be grasped and then applied to modern life. Rather, the text should be approached as a speech-event which discloses its meaning through its relationship to its context, to the faith, and to us."²¹ Randolph emphasizes the importance of the relationship between the text and the congregation, stating, "A true sermon is an address to a particular people at a particular time in a particular place; it is not a general word to the universe."²² The preacher should consider the question, "What does this text mean to me?" so that what the text says, and especially how the text says it, may be communicated by the preacher.²³ Randolph summarizes, "The goal of the preacher contemplating his text and the goal of the preacher confronting his congregation are the same--the hearing of the word of God; and there can be no true hearing without understanding."²⁴

Randolph also demonstrates the indissoluble relationship between the concern of the sermon and its confirmation in the listeners. Randolph describes confirmation as "the process by which the meaning of the biblical text is strengthened, corroborated, and engrained in the lives of the hearers."²⁵ He likens confirmation to three analogies, namely insight, beauty, and experience.²⁶ Randolph suggests confirmation is like "insight," that "moment when a situation is seen as a whole, and the viewer is given a clue as to how he is to act."²⁷ Therefore, confirmation addresses the appropriateness of a behavior in light of the meaning of the biblical text as

understood by the listener. Randolph proposes beauty is the aesthetic sense when a person becomes aware of reality.²⁸ Experience is the moment when truth moves from the cognitive to a personal authentication.²⁹

Confirmation, therefore, takes the slot usually assigned to illustration and integrates it into the entirety of the sermon for the purpose of illuminating the text throughout the sermon. “Whereas illustration is typically regarded as the addition of stories, quotations, and poems to the material, confirmation means that the story or poem or whatever *is* the material. Confirmation does not embellish argument, it *is* the argument.”³⁰ Furthermore, confirmation is not proof; rather, “Confirmation seeks to bring persons to the place where they may validate the claim of faith in their own lives; hence it calls for faith and obedience.”³¹

Confirmation is the organic expression of the concern of the biblical text which is to be experienced by the preacher and listener alike throughout the sermon. Randolph argues, “Authentication by existence is the fullest confirmation of the biblical text. This is the reason why preaching is not the packaging of a product but the evocation of an event.”³² The sermon as illustration invites listeners to experience the concern of the biblical text as an organic whole rather than as a series of interrelated, yet separate, ideas which need to be illuminated.

Randolph suggests the best modes of homiletic expression for the purposes of confirmation are parable, biography, autobiography, examples, and authentication by existence.³³ What is particularly striking about these modes of homiletical expression is their common emphasis on participation and personal experience. For example, Randolph states, “In the reading of a biblical story we are drawn into the drama; we become participants.”³⁴ The ability for the listener to participate in the experience of the text is paramount to the principle of confirmation. Furthermore, Randolph suggests that biblical stories have the ability to “shock us into recognition of ourselves by sensitizing us to the ‘depths of time, fate, and consciousness’ of human being.”³⁵ Randolph also emphasizes participation and personal experience in dialogue. Randolph contends, “The essence of dialogue lies in the quality of *exchange*, the stroking of meaning back and forth.”³⁶ It incorporates movement from the known to the unknown as truth is discovered through insight, beauty, and experience. Therefore, confirmation emphasizes the invitational quality of the sermon that authenticates experience over intellectual data and analysis.

Concretion, like confirmation, also subtly advocates the sermon as illustration rather than the sermon merely containing illustrations. “Concretion is the process whereby the meaning of the biblical text is brought to expression in the situation of the hearers. This process is brought about in the sermon by suggestions of concrete personal-social responses, which are intended by the text, although by definition the process moves beyond the explicitly sermonic.”³⁷

A significant question regarding the principle of concretion is how a sermon “does,” or, more specifically, how a “sermon connects the biblical text with the life of the congregation, confirms the meaning of the text, and brings it to expression in the life of the hearers.”³⁸ Randolph suggests two approaches, namely the direct and the indirect. Randolph claims, “The need for *direct* statement is clear, undeniable, and often effective. . . . But such statements tend to be most effective when they are occasional.”³⁹ Randolph believes it is the indirect approach that most

often brings the biblical text to expression in the lives of the hearers. It is the power of suggestion that stirs the imagination of the listeners and unfolds the meaning of the text in the concrete experiences of the hearers' lives. Randolph underscores the role of the biblical text expressing itself in the lives of the hearers, stating, "This is not just an addendum to the sermon; it is part of the sermon *by definition*."⁴⁰ Preaching must find expression in the significance of concrete experiences in the lives of people.

Randolph's explanation of sermon construction unveils how the sermon functions as illustration of a biblical text rather than integrating illustrations as aids within the sermon to elucidate the biblical text. Randolph writes, "The sermon should not be slapped onto a text, extraneous and superfluous to it, but should rather grow out of the text, organic to it, sharing its substance and shape."⁴¹ In other words, every part of the sermon ought to set the text in motion in the lives of the hearers. The question of sermon construction is really "the process of discovering and employing the verbal structure which best conveys the meaning of the biblical text to the hearers so that they are moved to respond to it."⁴²

Randolph maintains the sermon is not the assemblage of a title, an introduction, some points, and a conclusion; rather, the sermon is an organic form of growth which germinates in the biblical soil and emerges with its fruit in the lives of the listeners. "Concern, confirmation, and concretion must be shaped into a significant whole."⁴³ Therefore, the communicative patterns of the preacher should share and expose the significant patterns of the biblical text in such a way as to engage the listener in the experience of what the biblical text says and does. Randolph emphasizes construction of the sermon should take into account the literary form of the text and the "*sermonic form which best shares the intention and mood of the text*."⁴⁴ Therefore, the variety of sermonic forms is as vast as the variety of biblical literary forms. Nevertheless, the purpose of the sermon remains the same: the hearers will experience the concern of the biblical text through confirmation and concretion embodied in the construction of the sermon.

Confirming Biblical Texts in Concrete Expressions

Illustrations often function as supportive material to the main substance of the sermon. As a result, they are a hot commodity. Kalas observes, "Preachers seem always to be on a stretch and strain to find sermon illustrations. At a lecture for a clergy event, you see the pens come out and the desktops activate if you tell a story that might somehow fit into a sermon. I regret that many sermon illustrations sound as if they have been dragged in as filler, or that they are used to relieve tacitly confessed tedium in the biblical exposition."⁴⁵ Recent homiletics texts encourage preachers to use illustrations to make the point by incorporating narrative or life-situational elements into the sermon in order to facilitate the communication of a biblical text in relation to contemporary life.

An alternative to using illustrations as auxiliary material in the sermon is to integrate illustration into the body of the sermon in such a way as to make it indistinguishable from and indispensable to the rest of the sermon. In other words, confirm biblical texts in concrete expressions throughout the sermon resulting in the sermon as illustration of the biblical text. In order to do so, the preacher must be committed primarily to the following two practices.

First, demonstrate where the action of the biblical text intersects with the experience of the contemporary listener. In other words, involve listeners in the biblical text. The preacher, from the outset of one's study, needs to acknowledge the "indissoluble relationship and interaction between the involvement of the text and the real situation of the congregation."⁴⁶ Biblical texts are pregnant with characters, plot, conflict, resolution, and other elements of human interest. Every biblical text has a writer, audience, circumstances that affect the message proclaimed, and place within the larger context of God's Word. The elements of discontinuity between the biblical text and the contemporary listeners as well as the aspects of overarching continuity enable the contemporary listener to participate in the concern of the biblical text. The preacher collaborates with the Holy Spirit to assist listeners to enter a situation they have not actually experienced and emerge transformed as it affects them in the here and now. Therefore, the preacher must be committed to a dual focus: "the text of the Bible and the situation of the hearers...Preparing and delivering a sermon means that these two foci have to be interrelated in a process of continual reciprocity."⁴⁷

Second, use the concrete language and images of the biblical text. God's Word is pregnant with concreteness. Achtemeier observes, "[God] does not tell us to love all people; he commands us to love our neighbor, because our neighbor is a very specific person, right there on the spot. He does not ask us to show mercy in general; he points to the thirsty, the hungry, the imprisoned, the naked, and questions whether we have ministered to their very particular needs."⁴⁸ Furthermore, the biblical text is full of concrete images such as a race, a broken cistern, a lost coin, a panting deer, an adulterous lover, and most noteworthy, the incarnate Savior.

Ronald Allen, in his book *Preaching for Growth*, affirms, "Concreteness is a consistent mark of effective Christian preaching. When the gospel is expressed in concrete, specific terms and is concretely related to the situation of the listeners, the listeners are better able to feel the sermon addressed to them."⁴⁹ Therefore, rather than importing foreign images and ideas into the sermon, allow the inherent biblical images and language to shape the sermon. In this way, the entire sermon will function as illustration of the biblical text.

Conclusion

To view the sermon as illustration of the biblical text, rather than treating illustrations as auxiliary material in the sermon designed to clarify a specific idea or point, exalts the biblical text to its rightful place within the sermon – supreme. As a result, the complete process of sermon preparation and delivery is concentrated on the evocation of the biblical text in the lives of the listeners. As preachers confirm biblical texts in concrete expressions throughout the sermon, listeners will be able to experience and understand the truth of God's Word as it applies to their lives.

¹ Henry Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 255.

² As quoted in *Spurgeon's Lectures to his Students*, ed. David Otis Fuller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1945), 337.

³ Ibid.

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- ⁴ Thomas G. Long argues a shift in the understanding of the overall purpose of preaching in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries resulted in preachers using the term illustration to refer to rhetorical devices used to illumine and clarify a sermon's thesis or main points rather than to persuade one's hearers. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 156-61.
- ⁵ Bryan Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 19.
- ⁶ Donald E. Demaray, *Introduction to Homiletics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 139-145.
- ⁷ Leslie B. Flynn, *Come Alive With Illustrations: How to Find, Use, and File Good Stories for Sermons and Speeches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 25-7.
- ⁸ James W. Cox, *Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 210-14.
- ⁹ Jay Adams prefers to use the term 'storytelling' for 'illustrating' "since the latter is a single-sense appeal word." Nevertheless, he too lumps a variety of rhetorical devices together under three main categories. Adams asserts, "There are full stories (so-called illustrations and parables), abbreviated stories (examples), and mini-stories (instances; not really stories but the kernels of stories)." Jay E. Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1982), 90-1.
- ¹⁰ Long, 158. Long argues this "rise to prominence of the word 'illustration' was neither neutral nor innocent," but a result of a "shift in the overall understanding of the purpose of preaching." Ibid. Driven by the enlightenment's passion for the logical and rational presentation of ideas, illustrations were seen as devices designed to illumine and clarify that ordered communication of a thesis.
- ¹¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Creative Preaching: Finding the Words* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 104-6.
- ¹² Ilion T. Jones, *Principles and Practice of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 137-40.
- ¹³ Ian Macpherson, *The Art of Illustrating Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1964), 12-33.
- ¹⁴ John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. Jesse B. Witherspoon, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), 196.
- ¹⁵ See Chapell, *Using Illustrations*, 25-35.
- ¹⁶ David James Randolph is known internationally as a minister and educator. Randolph studied at the Universities of Delaware (B.A), Drew (M.Div.), Yeshiva (M.S.W), and Boston (Ph.D.). Randolph has taught worship and preaching courses as Drew University, Princeton Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary in New York, and elsewhere. The NBC TV Today Show, the National Radio Pulpit, the *New York Times*, and the *New York Post* have featured Randolph for his contribution to the renewal of religion. Furthermore, he is the author of several books and is the editor of the *Ventures in Worship* series, which opened the door for contemporary worship in many North American churches.
- ¹⁷ David James Randolph, *The Renewal of Preaching: A New Homiletic Based on the New Hermeneutic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 27. Randolph notes, "It transcends the subject-object dichotomy by being at the same time a 'thing' and an 'event.'" Ibid., 28.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 30.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 33.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 34.
- ²¹ Ibid., 49.
- ²² Ibid., 45.

²³ Ibid., 48.

²⁴ Ibid., 49. The listeners understand the concern of the biblical text not because the preacher interjects illustrations into the sermon, but as a result of the preacher bringing the concern of the biblical text into conversation with the congregation *throughout* the sermon so that it can be confirmed in the lives of the listeners.

²⁵ Ibid., 51. He notes that confirmation is the function of the main body of the sermon.

²⁶ These three analogies are intuitive, aesthetic, and personal in nature, elevating the significance of experience in preaching.

²⁷ Ibid., 51.

²⁸ Ibid., 52.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 52-3. Fred Craddock echoes, "In good preaching what is referred to as illustrations are, in fact, stories or anecdotes which do not illustrate the point; rather they *are* the point. In other words, a story may carry in its bosom the whole message rather than the illumination of a message which had already been related in another but less clear way." Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 204.

³¹ Randolph, 53.

³² Ibid., 73.

³³ Randolph, 60. Randolph recognizes that confirmation is achieved through the synergistic interplay between the concern of the biblical text, the preacher's careful use of rhetorical devices...delineates what is commonly lumped under the term 'illustration,' demonstrating that the use of any rhetorical device should...

³⁴ Ibid., 60.

³⁵ Ibid., 62.

³⁶ Ibid., 67.

³⁷ Ibid., 75. "Confirmation is itself a form of concretion when the act of understanding takes place for the hearer. . . . Confirmation emphasizes the 'hearing,' and concretion stresses the 'doing.'" Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 76.

³⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁴¹ Ibid., 97.

⁴² Ibid., 98. Randolph acknowledges his indebtedness to Davis stating, "H. Grady Davis makes this point brilliantly in one of the most creative and important recent works on preaching, *Design for Preaching*." Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁵ J. Ellsworth Kalas, *Preaching from the Soul: Insistent Observations on the Sacred Art* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 104.

⁴⁶ H. J. C. Pieterse, *Communicative Preaching* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1987), 12.

⁴⁷ Klass Runia, "What is Preaching According to the New Testament?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 41.

⁴⁸ Achtemeier, 97.

⁴⁹ Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching for Growth* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1988), 41.