

## **SPEAKING IN PICTURES: LANGUAGE FOR A POSTMODERN AUDIENCE**

Paul J. Hussey

Adjunct Professor

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

and

Minister of Pastoral Care and Senior Adults

First Baptist Church New Orleans

### **Abstract**

Because the postmodern listener is resistant to authoritative truth claims, imagination becomes an effective tool to mediate Christian truth for the listener. This paper looks at the concept of imagination, reviews imagination in select homiletical literature, and draws upon the conclusions of scientific studies to suggest that speaking in pictures created by appealing to both the right and left sides of the listener's brain is a language that enables the preacher to communicate effectively with a postmodern audience.

### **Introduction**

In his 1877 Yale Lectures, Phillips Brooks defined preaching as "the bringing of truth through personality." He stressed that the two elements, truth and personality, were both necessary for Christian preaching (Brooks, 1969, 5), but he spent much of his lectures talking about the preacher's personality.

His definition has influenced the thinking of others as they structured their own models of preaching (Broadus, 1979, 2-3). Haddon Robinson acknowledged Brooks's contribution and emphasized that "the audience does not hear a sermon, they hear a man" (Robinson, 1980, 24). Bryan Chapell felt the definition reflected biblical principle and common sense and underscored that while sermons should reflect the personality of the preacher, they should also reflect a Christ-likeness in the preacher (Chapell, 2001, 27). The element of personality seems to attract more attention from homileticians than the concept of truth. Perhaps the reason is that few have felt the need to argue the essence of truth or its prominent presence in Scripture. Declaring the truth of God's Word generally has been recognized as fundamental to Christian preaching. Unfortunately, this reasoning does not necessarily hold for a postmodern audience.

Postmoderns challenge this basic homiletical tenet by questioning the nature of truth and man's ability to find it. Theologian Millard J. Erickson writes that philosophy in the postmodern era "now has given up its older belief that there is such a thing as truth and that it can be discovered" (Erickson, 1998, 26-27). Brooks' definition reflects the promise of modernity to proclaim

universal truth. Erickson's statement categorizes the position of postmodernity which denies the existence of truth.

Paul Scott Wilson is appreciative for the postmodern influence in homiletics because of its use of narrative, its concern for the marginalized in society, and openness to other literary readings of the Bible. He notes, however, that a distinctive of postmodernity is its rejection of objective truth and adoption of truth based on one's perspective. Thus, "postmodernity can serve as an ideology that is inherently anarchic, de-stabilizing, anti-communal, de-constructive, opposing any kind of foundation, without at the same time calling for anything positive" (Wilson, 2004, 136). Kent Anderson says the postmodern listener feels it is offensive to proclaim truth to others. The preacher who makes authoritative truth claims appears arrogant to the postmodern because he declares his views to be superior to those of the listener (Anderson, 2006, 23).

In 2001, Graham Johnston wrote *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners*. He provided a detailed comparison of modernity and postmodernity. He noted that in the modern world the printed word dominated after the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in 1440. He claimed the postmodern era was initiated with the invention of the television. In postmodernity, the image rules over the printed word. Johnston observed the unique function of images: "Images leave the viewer, not with carefully crafted ideas and precepts but with impressions. Images function to allow the viewer to construct one's own interpretation" (Johnston, 2001, 48).

The postmodern preacher, who wishes to remain faithful to proclaiming the truth of God's Word and still find a hearing among his listeners, feels a strong tension. He can choose to forge ahead and declare truth in absolute, universal propositions, but the postmodern probably will not listen. Or, he can learn to speak a language that presents truth in a non-threatening manner that the postmodern will hear and accept. Can the present dominance of image, however, hold the key to preaching to a postmodern audience?

Images are not restricted to the media but can also be present in the mind. People often speak about seeing something in "the mind's eye" or make the statement "I see what you're saying." The concept of imagination has become a topic of interest in philosophy, cognitive science, literary studies, and homiletics. This paper looks at the concept of imagination, reviews imagination in select homiletical literature, and draws upon the conclusions of scientific studies to suggest that speaking in pictures created by appealing to both the right and left sides of the listener's brain is a language that enables the preacher to communicate with a postmodern audience.

### Imagination as a Concept

Imagination is not a new topic in homiletics or theology, but it has always been seated behind thinking governed by conceptualism. Scottish theologian John McIntyre lamented the failure of theology to properly value the role of imagination. Not only did he see value in recognizing its presence in theology, but in homiletical theory, ethics, epistemology, and the devotional life (McIntyre, 1987, 1-2).

In the Bible, imagination has been used to advantage in communicating a message and furthering the plans of God. Warren Wiersbe recalls in *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination* that in 2

Samuel 17, Absalom sought counsel on what he should do about his father David who had fled Jerusalem before his son's revolutionary forces. Ahithophel was Absalom's faithful advisor who laid out a logical plan to kill David and gain the support of all Israel. But Hushai, who was loyal to David, overpowered Ahithophel's logical plan by painting a picture with his words that appealed to Ahithophel. "In modern terms," writes Wiersbe, "Ahithophel used a cerebral 'left brain' approach and Hushai a visceral 'right brain' approach. Absalom heard what Ahithophel was saying, but he *saw* and *felt* what Hushai was saying" (Wiersbe, 1994, 15-17). Ahithophel spoke in words while Hushai spoke in pictures. Of course, Hushai was not technically preaching a sermon, but the implication of his success is that there is hope for the preacher who speaks in pictures with postmoderns who live in an age dominated by image and not intellectualism.

The use of imagination has not always been seen as positive in communicating God's truth. In fact it has generally been viewed with suspicion. McIntyre discussed two possible reasons for this attitude. One is the translation of various Hebrew and Greek words in the Authorized Version of the Bible by the single English word "imagination." All the references are "pejorative, implying that imagination is unacceptable to God in all its machinations" and should not be used (McIntyre, 1987, 5). Newer versions of the Bible more accurately translate the terms, but the universality of the Authorized Version has made many suspicious of imagination. Perhaps greater use of modern translations will begin to alleviate this negative opinion.

A second reason for suspicion of imagination comes from statements made in the Reformation, particularly by John Calvin, who viewed creating images as a way of manipulating God by His creatures. Pictures created in the imagination to represent God and His work, therefore, become a form of idolatry (McIntyre, 1987, 6). Contrary to those who would connect pictures in the imagination with idolatry stands Jesus with His teaching in parables. He connected everyday events like shepherding and farming to divine reality in order to paint pictures of the love and care of God for His people. Recent homiletical works studied the parables of Jesus and His ability to relate stories from everyday life so that even postmodern listeners could better understand God and His dealings with man (Blomberg, 2004; Stiller, 2005). Eugene Peterson used a war motif to describe the power of parables:

Parables subversively slip past our defenses. Once they're inside the citadel of self, we might expect a change of method, a sudden brandishing of bayonets resulting in a palace coup. But it doesn't happen. Our integrity is honored and preserved. God does not impose his reality from without; he grows flowers and fruit from within. God's truth is not an alien invasion but a loving courtship in which the details of our common lives are treated as seeds in our conception, growth, and maturity in the kingdom. Parables trust our imaginations, which is to say our faith. They don't herd us paternalistically into a classroom where we get things explained and diagrammed. They don't bully us into regiments where we find ourselves marching in a moral goose step (Peterson, 1993, 33)

Painting pictures in "the mind's eye" about God is not idolatry. On the contrary, the use of imagination brings the transcendent close to man's heart. People are attracted to beautiful pictures.

Another reason why many are skeptical of imagination is because people confuse imagination with the imaginary, or what Wiersbe and others call "fancy." Wiersbe distinguishes the two: "Imagination helps us penetrate reality and better understand it, while fancy helps us temporarily

escape reality and better endure it” (Wiersbe, 1994, 26). Fancy is a product of the imagination and has value in literary works, but it has no place in a sermon. The sermon is not a means of escape from the world, but a confrontation between that world with its inadequacies and the gospel with all its provisions. The purpose of using imagination in preaching is to see reality more clearly. According to Peterson, “imagination is indispensable, for it is only by means of the imagination that we can see reality whole, in context” (Peterson, 1992, 169-70).

Imagination is evident in both the Old and New Testaments and serves the purposes of God. Faulty translations of Scripture have helped create suspicion of imagination as have some narrow opinions coming out of the Reformation. Further skepticism also resulted from a confusion of imagination and the imaginary. But how have homileticians treated imagination in their writings?

### Imagination in Homiletical Literature

Generally, Protestant preaching has depended on classical rhetoric to help persuade listeners to accept the truth of the gospel message. The eminent nineteenth-century homiletician, John Broadus, defined homiletics as “simply the adaptation of rhetoric to the particular ends and demands of preaching” (Broadus, 1979, 10-11). Thomas Troeger, who has written two books on imagination in preaching, applauded logical preaching that followed the method of Cicero. “It taught the people who listened week after week,” he said, “that it was possible and indeed necessary, to think in an orderly way about the Christian faith” (Troeger, 1990, 48). Up to the postmodern age this method of preaching served as a successful model, but not now. Postmodern listeners are not persuaded by a logically crafted argument grouped around authoritative propositions no matter how cleverly or entertaining they are presented. Postmoderns want to have a part in determining what is true and real. They want truth that coincides with their experience, not someone else’s ideas that require their conformity.

Imagination can stand as a valid bridge between what God’s Word says and what the postmodern thinks. Imagination can enable the listener to envision divine reality by allowing him to utilize his own perceptions and feel the weight of that truth. However, left to his own imaginative ways, the postmodern listener can easily slip into thinking that carries him farther away from God’s truth. The conversation among other truth systems to which the postmodern listens with equal intensity can confuse his sense of direction. The challenge of the postmodern preacher, therefore, is to direct the imagination of the listener by speaking in pictures that rely on appeals to both the left side and right side of the listener’s brain. The entire mind of the listener must be engaged in a holistic approach.

In his book *The Human Situation*, William Macneile Dixon wrote “the human mind is not, as philosophers would have you think, a debating hall, but a picture gallery. Around it hangs our similes, our concepts” (Dixon, 1957, 65). The preacher who directs the listener’s imagination to reflect the truth of the biblical text will need to paint pictures with his words so that the listener can hang them on the walls of his mind. The listener is free to participate in creating these pictures by relying on his experience and perception, but he is assisted by and guided by the directions of the preacher to accurately see the truth of the biblical text. The imagination builds bridges between the right brain and the left brain “so that *vision* has *supervision* and doesn’t become just *visionary*” (Wiersbe, 1994, 25). The whole mind is engaged in painting mental pictures.

As long as the homily and its more left brain successors prevailed in preaching, very little room existed for imagination to find a useful place. The Enlightenment produced the modern mind with its emphasis on an orderly, logical method of thinking. The reaction to such left brain thinking resulted in the Romantic Movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Poets William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Blake led the campaign to give imagination a greater place in literature and Western thinking. This greater openness to right brain thinking enabled Broadus to declare that “without imagination the principles of preaching cannot be utilized in effective preaching. The invention of materials, the construction of discourse, the style of expression in language and delivery are equally dependent upon it” (Broadus, 1979, 220).

Significantly, Broadus wanted to separate imagination from fancy. He clearly wished to identify imagination with what is real, not what is unreal. He called imagination a “manipulative” process because it collected facts and experiences, observed their relations, and then fashioned them into new understandings (Broadus, 1979, 221-22). Yet, the process was not without constraint. Reality must govern imagination.

Broadus described a four-fold understanding of imagination: 1) it has value in constructing discourse because it takes familiar materials and rearranges them into new shapes, 2) it enables the preacher to give thought concrete expression which “excites the imagination of another and then affects his feelings (Broadus, 1979, 225), 3) it empowers the preacher to vividly depict the scenes and events of Scripture, and 4) it demonstrates that the preacher sympathizes with the feelings of listeners “to make the healing and guiding connections between life and truth which alone make his preaching worthwhile” (Broadus, 1979, 227).

Because of the popularity of Broadus’s homiletical volume, one questions why imagination did not gain a larger role in preaching. Troeger suggested an answer: “Homiletics in the modern age was less concerned about this [imaginative theology] for at least two reasons: first, the images inherited from Scripture and tradition still enjoyed some degree of cultural hegemony, and second, the mass media were print media” (Troeger, 1988, 31)

Individual voices spoke to the value of imagination but without generating widespread interest. For example, Andrew Blackwood wrote *Preaching from the Bible* in which he devoted a chapter to “The Interpreter’s Imagination” (Blackwood, 1941, 197-215). A decade later he dedicated another chapter to imagination in *Biographical Preaching for Today* entitled “The Call for a Lively Imagination” (Blackwood, 1954, 131-49). However, when H. Grady Davis wrote his seminal work, *Design for Preaching*, in the late 1950s and applied the organic thought of the Romantics to preaching, he prepared the way for new varieties of sermonic forms such as inductive preaching “that explores experience and narrows to a focus” (Wilson, 2004, 72) and narrative preaching that is reflective of the gospel’s “simple narrative of persons, places, happenings, and conversation” (Davis, 1958, 157). Imagination could then be considered as a viable sermonic form and not just material to illustrate a proposition.

Troeger has gained the reputation as “the most influential writer” within the New Homiletics. He advocates and practices preaching with imagination as an alternative to traditional preaching (Edwards, 2004, 815). The first of his two books on the use of imagination is *Creating Fresh Images for Preaching: New Rungs for Jacob’s Ladder*. The book itself is designed around images such as stories and visualizations of Scripture, some of which Troeger imported from

sermons he preached. For Troeger, “the imagination provides a visual focus around which listeners can arrange not only the preacher’s thoughts but also their own life and experience” (Troeger, 1982, 19).

*Imagining a Sermon*, Troeger’s second book, presents his case in a more direct manner for using imagination to prepare and deliver a sermon. He emphasizes that imagination is not random or chaotic, but it functions according to Paul Ricoeur’s “rule-governed” principle. He writes each chapter on one of seven rules for governing the use of imagination: alert the eye to keener sight, feel the bodily weight of truth, listen to the music of speech, draw parables from life, understand the church’s resistance to imagination, dream of new worlds, and return to the Source. The basis for these rules rests in the purpose of humans to relate to the Creator with their entire being (Troeger, 1990, 30).

The validity of using imagination in preaching, especially for postmoderns, is strengthened by scientific studies on the relation of the brain’s two hemispheres (see Finger, 2000). Many people are aware that the left side of the brain processes information in a linear way, dividing it into segments, analyzing it, and understanding it logically. The right hemisphere views data more comprehensively, relates more directly to emotions, and responds to information more intuitively. What some may not realize, because of an oversimplified understanding in popular thought of left brain and right brain activity, is that no person operates out of one hemisphere alone in his thinking. No person is either right brain or left brain. Both hemispheres cooperate to form mental images (Ornstein, 1997, 68). Furthermore, these images can be created in a listener’s mind by using language that stimulates both the left brain and right brain.

In their book *Learning to Preach Like Jesus*, Ralph and Gregg Lewis focused on the value of utilizing the findings of brain research in preaching:

For centuries now, homiletics, like most other areas of ministerial training, has concentrated on left-brain preferences: words, speech, analysis, theory, theology, abstraction, arguments, and propositions. The right brain accents of the Bible, the prophets, and especially Jesus have been lost in the rhetorical rules and the carefully scripted, logical language favored by traditional homiletics. The visual, metaphorical, creative, holistic, and concrete have been eclipsed by more cognitive, abstract, left-brain instruction (Lewis and Lewis, 1989, 48).

Lewis and Lewis proposed to correct this imbalance by following the model established in the preaching of Jesus in which “He used imagery and words that formed pictures in His listeners’ minds” and which “riveted His truth in their minds and nudged them into life-changing patterns of behavior” (Lewis and Lewis, 1989, 48). Likewise, the postmodern preacher is able to form pictures in listeners’ minds by stimulating both sides of their brains with metaphors, narratives, and evocative language.

### Imagination in Preaching for Postmoderns

#### *Metaphors*

Metaphors are used in everyday speech. They connect two seemingly unrelated things in order to produce new meaning. Wiersbe wrote that a preacher can “turn people’s ears into eyes and help them see the truth” by using metaphorical language (Wiersbe, 1994, 43). He suggested that a

successful biblical metaphor builds at least three bridges to help listeners connect what he previously thought was unrelated. The first bridge is between the listener and the biblical text. The listener feels that the Word is speaking to him personally and is just not sent to a general audience: “The Word is heard, not simply as the text of a sermon, but as the voice of God coming to the worshiper in a living way” (Wiersbe, 1994, 78).

The second bridge is between the listener’s past and his present. Past experiences and their memories are brought together to give the listener hope and encouragement. The listener’s view of contemporary reality is forged from a combination of past recollections and present experiences.

The third bridge is between the person’s heart and mind. Reasoning and feeling are brought together by the clash of opposites in a metaphor. Metaphors disturb the listener and force him “into a confrontation with the truth” (Wiersbe, 1994, 80). Thus, Paul Scott Wilson describes metaphor as “a tensive form of language that demand[s] participation in order to be understood” (Wilson, 2004, 63). Through metaphor, then, the preacher can illicit the memory and experience of the postmodern listener to combine with the biblical record in a collaborative exercise of creating an image of divine reality.

### *Narratives*

Narratives also stimulate the imagination of the listener. Davis suggested in 1958 that a sermon could take the form of a narrative whose distinguishing characteristic is that the sermonic idea “is embedded in a structure of events and persons, rather than in a structure of verbal generalizations” (Davis, 1958, 157). After Davis, others began to write about the value of narrative as sermonic form (Craddock, 1971; Lowry, 1980). Narratives draw the listener into the world of the persons, places, and happenings in the story. They appeal to the senses of the listener so that an emotional bond is established and the listener is more likely to identify with the message embedded in the story. Narratives make use of both the right brain and the left brain with its sequential story-telling and concrete, emotional language.

### *Evocative Language*

In addition to metaphors and narratives, the preacher is able to speak in pictures to the postmodern listener by using evocative language. William Kooienga wrote that evocative language “brings thought to life and gives it a visible and tangible quality. It does that by appealing to the listener’s memory of experiences” (Kooienga, 1989, 81). Appealing to the listener’s senses and creating scenes within his mind are made possible by descriptive language and “when carefully planned and properly executed, descriptive language delights the listener and assists persuasion” (Kooienga, 1989, 82). But evocative language is more than descriptive. It calls out from the listener sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and feelings that are stored in his memory. These sensory memories are very personal and can be guided by the preacher’s directions to relate better to the reality of the Word. The preacher mediates the Word of God and the memories of the listener so that imagination can bring about life changing results.

## Conclusion

Postmodern listeners think differently than people from the modern era. Whereas the modern person looked for universal truths, the postmodern person searches for personal meaning that may or may not match another's. A particular challenge for the contemporary preacher is to learn how to draw together the various opinions of postmodern listeners and bring them under the influence of the divine power of the Word so that a life-changing transformation takes place. Imagination is a strong means for achieving this goal. It operates easily in a culture dominated by image and enables the postmodern listener to participate in determining truth under the Spirit-filled direction of the preacher. The preacher can stimulate the listener's imagination to see biblical truth by making use of metaphors, narratives, and evocative language. These methods allow the preacher to speak to postmodern listeners in pictures that attract their attention without offending their sensibilities. Imagination is language for a postmodern audience.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Kenton C. *Choosing to Preach: An Introduction to Sermon Options and Structures*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.
- Blackwood, Andrew W. *Preaching from the Bible*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1941.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Biographical Preaching for Today: The Pulpit Use of Cases*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1954.
- Blomberg, Craig L. *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Broadus, John A. *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. rev. Vernon L. Stanfield. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979.
- Brooks, Phillips. *Lectures on Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, reprint 1969.
- Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994.
- Craddock, Fred B. *As One without Authority*, rev. ed. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001.
- Davis, Henry Grady. *Design for Preaching*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958.
- Dixon, William Macneile. *The Human Situation: The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Glasgow, 1935-1937*. London: Edward Arnold Publishers, Ltd, 1957.
- Edwards, O. C., Jr. *A History of Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.
- Finger, Stanley. *Minds Behind the Brain: A History of the Pioneers and Their Discoveries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Johnston, Graham. *Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-first Century Listeners*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001.
- Kooienga, William. *Elements of Style for Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989.
- Lewis, Ralph L., and Gregg Lewis. *Learning to Preach Like Jesus*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1989.
- Lowry, Eugene L. *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1980.
- McIntyre, John. *Faith Theology and Imagination*. Edinburgh, Scotland: The Handsel Press, Ltd, 1987.

- Ornstein, Robert. *The Right Mind: Making Sense of the Hemispheres*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1997.
- Peterson, Eugene H. *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993.
- Robinson, Haddon H. *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Troeger, Thomas H. *Creating Fresh Images: New Rungs for Jacob's Ladder*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Imagining the Sermon*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990.
- Stiller, Brian C. *Preaching Parables to Postmoderns*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.
- Wiersbe, Warren W. *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination: The Quest for Biblical Ministry*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994.
- Wilson, Paul Scott. *Preaching and Homiletical Theory*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004.