

SECTION 22

Illustrations

THE POWER AND PURPOSE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

“People will forget your exegesis and points, but they will remember your illustrations, especially your stories.”

-Danny Akin

“There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries than the necessity of listening to sermons.”

-Anthony Trollope (1815-1882)
(quoted in *Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Winter 1998, p.44)

“Nothing is more difficult than finding the right illustration and using it in the right way at the right time. However, few things will yield greater fruit.”

-Danny Akin

*“... 75% of the OT is narrative
What an explosive element for contemporary preaching.”*

-(Chappell, p.175)

INTRODUCTION:

Bryan Chappell cites two surveys in his book on preaching: one of religious professionals and the other of lay persons. The results are quite revealing and, even humbling, to the expositor of Scripture.

CLYDE REID'S SURVEY OF RELIGIOUS PROFESSIONALS:

1. Preachers tend to use complex, archaic language.
2. Most sermons are dull, boring and uninteresting.
3. Most preaching today is irrelevant.
4. Preaching today is not courageous preaching.
5. Preaching does not communicate.
6. Preaching does not lead to change in persons.
7. Preaching has been overemphasized.

REUEL HOWE'S INTERVIEWS OF LAY PEOPLE:

1. Sermons contain too many complex ideas.
2. Sermons have too much analysis and too little answers.
3. Sermons are too formal and too impersonal.
4. Sermons use too much theological jargon.
5. Sermons are too propositional, not enough illustrations.
6. Sermons give no guidance to commitment and action.

Good illustrations are clearly one of the most important aspects of the sermon, especially in light of our modern day culture. Jesus was the master illustrator in His teaching and preaching (ref. Mark 4:1-2).

- **As a rule, great preachers have always been great illustrators.**

“...when I listen to Mr. Whitefield, I cannot even lay the keel.’ And another, a weaver, said, ‘I have often, when I have been in church, calculated how many looms the place would hold; but when I listen to that man, I forget my weaving altogether.’ You must endeavour, brethren, to make your people forget matters relating to this world by interweaving the whole of divine truth with the passing things of every day, and this you will do by a judicious use of anecdotes and illustrations.”
-(Spurgeon, *Lectures*, p.52)

I. DEFINITION

ILLUSTRATION – “to light, to give light, to make clear and show the relevance.”

1. **Window** - giving light to the truth, it is a window into the house of a message (Spurgeon).
2. **Verbal Picture** - a mental photograph, it turns the ear into an eye!

Jerry Vines says a good illustration might be the difference between an average sermon and an outstanding sermon.

II. BASIS OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. **Biblical** - There are many examples in Scripture (Psalm 23; the teaching of Jesus)
2. **Pedagogical** - (teaching) - Abstract truths are made concrete by illustrations.
 - a. We process information on various levels of abstraction.
 - b. Sermon should move from abstract to concrete thought.
3. **Psychological** - The brain has two parts (Analytical/Reflective & Emotional) All five senses move first through the emotional part of the brain before they enter the reflective part. Emotional part of the brain is used when an illustration is told.

III. IMPORTANCE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. We live in a visual age. We must be vivid and imaginative.
2. Nature of gospel requires use of illustrations.

3. Effective preachers of every age demonstrate the importance of good illustrations.
Example: Jonathon Edwards – “Sinners in the Hands...” -Spider over flames!
is like a man dangling over Hell!
4. Illustrations help avoid misunderstanding, distraction, neglect, monotony, and apathy.
5. They enhance your own worldview and creativity.

IV. PURPOSE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Instruct and Inform
2. Explain and make clear
3. Assist the preacher in identifying (build a bridge) with congregation
4. Memory aid
5. Help to capture and regain attention - average mind begins to wander after about 5-7 minutes of discourse without an illustration.
6. Motivate, persuade, and convince (stir the emotions)
7. Allow for mental relaxation
8. Make repetition possible without weariness
9. Help congregation see the relevance of text
10. Make particular and personal the general/universal truth
11. Render truth believable
12. Create an awareness of need in the listener
13. Create interest
14. Explain doctrine and duty in an understandable way
15. Catch the ear of the disinterested

V. TYPES OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Biblical Events - but remember, the average congregation is biblically illiterate
2. Experiences of Others - but get permission first (especially if it is your wife!!)
3. Personal Experiences
4. Human Interest Stories
5. Current Events
6. Historical Events
7. Literature - (poems memorized and presented dramatically, etc.)
8. Hymns - (quoting a stanza or giving story of the author's life)
9. Science
10. Jokes
11. Figures of Speech

VI. SOURCES OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Bible
2. Newspapers
3. Personal Experiences/Observations
4. Magazines - (Reader's Digest, Time, etc.)
5. Books
6. Other Sermons
7. Creative Imagination – “Just suppose...” or “Let's pretend that...”
8. Science and Nature
9. Conversations with People – “Bill and I were talking the other day...”

10. Cartoon Strips - (Peanuts, etc.)
11. Joke Books
12. History
13. World Literature
14. Your Family (don't overuse or abuse)
15. Memory of Original Words
16. Biographies
17. Books of Quotations
18. Almanacs
19. Current Thoughts and Trends
20. People in your congregation who help you by looking for good illustrations
21. Dictionaries and Encyclopedias
22. Internet
23. Reader's Guide Index to Periodical Literature

VII. GUIDELINES FOR USE OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Do not over-illustrate!
2. Use, but do not abuse, personal illustrations
3. Seek variety
4. Don't misinterpret the truth - be honest, tell the truth and make it credible
5. Don't use illustrations in bad taste - follow the rule of modesty
6. Never use counseling situations without prior permission - violates confidences (can also land you in jail!)
7. Master the illustration - tell it well
8. Do not announce the illustration

9. Make sure it has life! See the story in your mind. Get into it as you tell it (empathize).
10. Don't overuse a particular illustration (in the same church)
11. Don't use illustrations as mere decorations
12. Don't apologize for illustrating
13. Be sure the illustration illustrates!
14. Be vivid. Learn how to tell a story
15. Develop a sense of humor
16. Practice the dramatic
17. Don't be humorous just to be funny
18. Don't use canned, trite, commonplace and overused illustrations
19. Be specific and detailed, not general and vague
20. Don't use an illustration simply to play on people's emotions
21. Keep the occasion and congregation in mind. What works in one place may not fit in another (especially in a different country or culture)
22. Don't make fun of anyone other than yourself
23. Give credit when you should
24. Get to the point quickly
25. Use strong descriptions

VIII. CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD ILLUSTRATIONS (JERRY VINES)

1. Good illustrations clarify the truth you are communicating.
2. Good illustrations assist in persuasion.
3. Good illustrations easily identify with the people.
4. Good illustrations pull the heartstrings of the people.

5. Good illustrations are colorful, not drab.
6. Good illustrations touch people where they live.
7. Good illustrations are appropriate to the audience and circumstance.
8. Good illustrations are believable.

IX. THE USE OF HUMOR

1. Humor should add, not detract, from your sermon.
2. Humor should be appropriate to the subject matter.
3. Humor should point toward what you are trying to communicate.
4. Humor must be natural to you.
5. Humor should not be used simply to be funny.

X. SAVING YOUR ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Write them down when you hear them.
2. Keep a journal of illustrations.
3. Record them on a tape recorder.
4. Put them on a computer.
5. Memorize them.
6. Develop a system comfortable to you that will preserve and make easily retrievable your gathering of illustrative material.
 - a) Alphabetically by topic
 - b) Sequentially by biblical text
 - c) Randomly in a general file (least helpful)
 - d) Other