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A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THE USE OF ILLUSTRATIONS  
IN EXPOSITORY PREACHING AT FIRST BAPTIST  
CHURCH, BROOMFIELD, COLORADO

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by  
Allen Ray Raynor

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To Tommi,  
whose love, support, and dedication have  
been a consistent source of strength and  
personal encouragement.

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## PREFACE

I wish to thank a number of people who were instrumental in the completion of this project. The encouraging words and prayers of several have not gone unnoticed. At the top of the list is my wife, Tommi, who has always believed in me and been an unwavering source of encouragement. I also wish to thank our four children: Rebekah, Mark, Ryan, and Devin, for helping to keep their dad grounded in what is really important in life when, at times, things were confusing. I also wish to thank my parents, Ray and Deana, for their love, encouragement, financial support, and belief in me which has spanned my entire life. I would like to thank the church body at First Baptist Church of Broomfield, Colorado, for their encouragement throughout and participation in this project. I would like to thank Dr. Charles Lawless for helping me to select my project topic and for his productive comments which challenged me to think more deeply about the issues covered in this project. I also wish to thank Dr. Brian Vickers, who worked so diligently to review my work and offered great insight as to how it could be improved. I also would like to acknowledge my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who called me out of my sins to a new life with him, and further, called me to proclaim his good news. To him alone belongs all the glory!

Allen R. Raynor

New London, Missouri

May 2012



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Purpose**

This project was intended to help me improve the use of illustrations in expository preaching, whereby strengthening the congregations understanding of sermonic points at First Baptist Church, Broomfield, Colorado.

#### **Goals**

This project intended to accomplish four particular goals. The first goal was to lead the membership of First Baptist Church to recognize expository preaching. Through a pre-project congregational survey, the careful attention to preparation of illustrations in expository style messages delivered over a 6-week period, and through a post-project survey of the congregation, I hoped to discover an increased awareness of expository preaching on the part of the congregation.

The second goal was to discover how to *better* use illustrations in expository preaching. This included such discoveries as how to find and use the most effective types of illustrations in contemporary expository preaching, and how best to present illustrations in a modern context.

The third goal was to enlist a group of church members in order to evaluate use of illustrations. This was accomplished through the formation of a focus group which met with me immediately after each sermon preached for a period of 6 weeks.

Through the feedback of participants, I gleaned helpful insight which I am now able to apply to my own preaching, and am further able to teach others these principles.

The fourth goal was to teach selected church leaders how to use illustrations in their teaching and/or preaching ministries. I taught principles I had learned during my project, to other teachers and lay-preachers over a 5-session training period. Many of the insights gained from focus group feedback were applicational, not only to myself, but also to others who preach occasionally and to those who teach in a church setting on a regular or occasional basis in such venues as Sunday School.

### **Historical and Contextual Background**

First Baptist Church is located in Broomfield, Colorado, 15 miles north of downtown Denver. The Denver metropolitan area is composed of roughly 2 million people, with Denver proper being 558,000, and several large suburbs making up the balance, including Broomfield, Westminster, Thornton, Arvada, Aurora, Lakewood, Littleton, Centennial, Northglenn, Commerce City, Golden, Wheat Ridge, and Englewood, . Broomfield is actually one of the smaller suburbs at a population of 48,000. Broomfield has nearly doubled in size since the 1990 census was taken.<sup>1</sup>

The Denver metropolitan area is quite diverse with several dozen ethnic groups being represented. Whites make up approximately 48 percent of the population while 52 percent is now composed of other ethnic groups, most prominent among them being Hispanics.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Zoe Kashner, ed., *The World Almanac and Book of Facts 2007* (New York: World Almanac Books, 2007), 549.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

The First Baptist Church of Broomfield, Colorado, began as a mission church sponsored by Broadway Baptist Church of nearby Boulder, with the first service held on December 16, 1956, in what was known as the Old Broomfield School Building. Three Colorado University students and also members of Broadway Baptist Church cooperated in holding afternoon preaching services at this school. On the first Sunday of January 1957, one of those students, Keith Harris, began a ministry as mission pastor which extended until January 1958.<sup>3</sup>

In October 1957, Broadway Baptist Church purchased a residence at 300 West Midway Boulevard with a plan to make improvements in the basement for the purpose of holding Sunday School classes. The mission pastor and his family would live in the upper story.<sup>4</sup>

Two mission pastors, Keith Harris and Delbert Miles, served the church between 1957 and 1959. The mission was fully constituted as Emerald Street Baptist Church on October 18, 1959 with 28 charter members and W.C. Drummond serving as the first pastor of the newly formed congregation.<sup>5</sup>

A groundbreaking for the first building was on February 14, 1960, with completion coming about on June 5, 1960. At that time, the name of the church was officially changed from Emerald Street Baptist Church to First Baptist Church. Later, an

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<sup>3</sup>Information taken from a file labeled "Church History." Available in the church office of First Baptist Church, Broomfield, Colorado.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

educational wing was added, and a new auditorium and office suite was completed in December 1974.<sup>6</sup>

In the fifty-three year history of the church, the average length of stay for a pastor has been slightly less than four years, with the longest serving pastor being Mike Ruptak, who served for a period of 8 years (1977-85). The church has unfortunately experienced a number of setbacks due to church splits. The first of these splits occurred in the early 1970s with several other major and minor ones occurring over subsequent years. The most recent split occurred in 2004, stemming from controversy surrounding the Associate Pastor.<sup>7</sup>

Attendance has fluctuated rather significantly over the years. First Baptist Church has never averaged more than about 180, its peak worship attendance in the 1970s before its first split occurred. The church peaked at about 150 average worship attendance in the early 2000s under the leadership of pastor John Hall. When Hall left in 2003, the church immediately dropped approximately 40 in average attendance, then experienced a split the following year which led to the loss of another 30 in average attendance.<sup>8</sup>

When I became pastor of First Baptist Church in July 2005, the church was averaging only about 70 in worship attendance. I came into a situation where many hurt feelings still existed over issues which occurred in the period between April 2003 when John Hall left and July 2005 when I became pastor. During this period of 2 years and 3

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Information taken from weekly attendance records, which are available in the church office of First Baptist Church, Broomfield, Colorado.

months, the church had 4 different interim pastors. Today, the church averages only about 90 in worship attendance and 70 in Sunday School each week.<sup>9</sup>

The Denver metro area, and Broomfield in particular, is a highly transient area. The major employment is in technology related fields. The median income of Broomfield is just over 50,000 dollars per year, higher than the national average. The median age is 33.5, with only just under 2,800 residents over the age of 65.<sup>10</sup> Educationally, 37.8 percent of Broomfield residents have a bachelor's degree or higher. Broomfield is 88.3 percent white. The median value of a home is \$190,700.<sup>11</sup>

Families tend to move to the metropolitan area work for a period of months or years, then move away. It is not uncommon to add several families to the church in the span of 1 year while losing an equal number due to re-location. Despite the addition of more than 100 new members during my tenure, the average attendance today is actually lower than when my ministry began.

The church is located at the corner of Emerald and 1<sup>st</sup> street in Broomfield in the Broomfield Heights subdivision, with most of the homes being built in the 1950s. It is the oldest neighborhood in Broomfield, with virtually all growth occurring northeast of where the church is located by approximately 5-8 miles. The church has no visibility from a major street and is nestled back into a neighborhood. The decorum of the auditorium is 1970s style lighting, carpeting, and pew upholstery. Several attempts by the Colorado Baptist General Convention, The Mile High Baptist Association, former

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>U.S. Census Bureau: Fact Sheet, [on-line]; accessed 14 August 2008; available from [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFacts?\\_zip=80020](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFacts?_zip=80020); Internet.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

pastors, interim pastors, and myself have been made to encourage the church to consider re-location. All attempts have failed for various reasons. The primary reasons are opposition by a couple of the church's patriarchs, the lack of serious commitment to the church by many of the most recent additions, the economic reality of actually accomplishing a move, the feeling of security knowing the present property and building are free of debt, and other general complacency. It is my belief the church will never experience significant growth in its present location.

Growth patterns of the church do not reflect the growth patterns of Broomfield and the surrounding area. The area has grown rapidly while the church has remained largely the same, and even declined. Generally, but not in every case, the church seems to have peaks in attendance near the second and third years of one of the pastor's tenures, dipping significantly when he leaves.<sup>12</sup>

Today there are only 4 individuals in the church who were present prior to 1990. There are no charter members still in the church. There are fewer than 5 persons in the church today who were added during the previous pastor's tenure. The church body is made up of 4 persons who came in the late 1960s, approximately 10 who came in the early 1990s, approximately 5 who came during the tenure of John Hall, approximately 5 persons who joined during the interim period between myself and the former pastor, approximately 45 who have joined since my coming to the church, and a significant number (20-30) of regular and semi-regular attendees who have not yet officially joined the church.

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<sup>12</sup>Information taken from weekly attendance records, which are available in the church office of First Baptist Church, Broomfield, Colorado.

There appears little hope that the church will break free of the patterns of the past without making several significant changes. At this point, it has many hindrances to growth. It attracts very few lost or un-churched living in the community, but instead tends to attract and add members by transfer of membership of those who move to the metro area from out of state, especially Oklahoma and Texas.

### **Project Rational**

In Romans 10:14 Paul writes, “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?”<sup>13</sup> The high calling and distinguished responsibility of every preacher of the gospel is to communicate with excellence the message of the Word of God. In order to accomplish this task, he must be well prepared overall, but in several specific areas individually. Not only must he have expounded a passage correctly, but he also must communicate what he has learned in a manner which is understandable and applicable to the minds and hearts of the audience. The use of illustration is one of the most effective tools by which an expository preacher is able to connect with his audience and assist them in understanding and remembering sermonic points.

The responsibility of the preacher goes beyond merely delivering messages; it goes so far as to actually teach knowledge to the people of God. He is ever to be on a quest to discover ways and means to better communicate the timeless truth of God.

Ecclesiastes 12:9-11 says,

And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words and what was written was upright – words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are

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<sup>13</sup>All Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are from the New King James Version.

like well-driven nails, given by one shepherd.

Wise and carefully chosen words have lasting impacts on individuals, churches, even nations. To be a good communicator is to possess power. The preacher seeks this communicative power for the specific purpose of bringing glory and honor to God and to lead the people to do as Solomon commended in Ecclesiastes 12:13, “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all.”

People understand both God and the world around them only in part, but as 1 Corinthians 13:12 indicates, there will come a day when people will understand things in all their fullness. In the meantime, we are limited to what the flesh can comprehend. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” “Earthen vessels” is another way of saying “clay pots.” Man is currently limited to the confines of the flesh, specifically the “earthen vessel” in which he abides. He must be taught by that which he can relate to his fleshly circumstances, specifically the world in which he lives. It is for that reason that the use of relatable illustrations is so important in expository preaching. It is a bridging of a gap between the unknowable and the knowable.

There are a number of times within scripture itself where illustrations are used to convey truth. Jesus, for instance, taught by use of parables, comparing truth to something familiar or earthy which the people could understand (“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed . . . The kingdom of heaven is like leaven . . . The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field . . .” [Matt 13:31 ff.]). Paul, when illustrating doctrinal concepts, often used visual images to make his point more clear. He used imagery from athletics (“I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” [Phil 3:14]) and the military (“You therefore must endure hardship as a



good soldier of Jesus Christ” [2 Tim 2:3]) to make his point. In Acts 17, in what is known as his Mars Hill encounter with the philosophers, he used several interesting statements to try and illuminate biblical truth. In verse 28, he actually quoted one of their own poets, someone with whom they were evidently quite familiar.

There are places scattered throughout scripture where God did much more than merely tell His people a truth. Quite often He illustrated it in some manner. In Ezekiel 37:1-14, God illustrated to the prophet, then his people that there was hope beyond their present affliction in Babylon. He could have merely just told them so but instead chose to convey this truth in the form of an illustration – one of the most notable in all of scripture. Also in Hosea 3:1, God not only speaks of His love for and capacity to forgive his people, but he actually creates a visual image through the relationship between Hosea and his adulterous wife Gomer.

In modern preaching, one needs to be cognizant of the fact the world is saturated with all forms of secular interests and entertainments. One can no longer assume when he mentions Adam and Eve that people will necessarily know who they are. The ability of people to stack biblical truth upon a foundation already laid is becoming more and more a relic of the past. The modern preacher should be readily aware that the connection point for many people will be illustrations of biblical truth which somehow intersect with their lives. Preachers need, within reason, to develop the ability to illustrate biblical truth in a way humankind can understand and apply it to their lives, without ever compromising the integrity of the Scripture itself. This was the goal for this project: to improve my ability to illustrate timeless biblical truth to a modern audience.

I feel that my ability to illustrate sermonic points was greatly improved through the labors of this project, yet there still stands much room for improvement. Over the course of my years serving in a preaching capacity I have become increasingly aware that it is the illustration of biblical truth which tends to be remembered long-term. My desire is to help hearers remember biblical truths long enough to make application to their day to day lives.

### **Definitions and Limitations**

In conducting this project, I worked from the now classic definition of expository preaching given by Haddon Robinson in his book *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*. Robinson gives his definition as

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers.<sup>14</sup>

I also worked from the definition of illustration given by Bryan Chapell in his book *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*. Chapell has adapted his definition from a definition given by Jay Adams in his book *Preaching with Purpose: A Comprehensive Textbook on Biblical Preaching*. Chapell writes,

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.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 20.

<sup>15</sup>Bryan Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 21.

This project was limited in that it could not, by any means, exhaust the topic of improving the use of illustrations in expository preaching. It was also limited in that it cannot measure long-term effects, but only the short-term.

### **Research Methodology**

Through means of a pre-project survey of the entire congregation, I was able to determine the congregational understanding of expository preaching. This survey had some questions which related directly to illustrations and how they do or do not enhance the understanding of the people concerning the messages preached.

Over a period of 6 weeks, beginning with the third week of the project and continuing through the eighth week, I preached a particular expository series with careful attention being given to use of appropriate illustrations (Appendix 2). I have preached in an expository manner on a regular basis for years therefore, this type of preaching was nothing new; however, the major change came in that I spent considerably more time in choosing, processing, and honing the illustrations I used in this particular sermon series.

During this same 6-week period, I enlisted a focus group composed of 7 people who met with me immediately after the sermons preached and answered a few brief questions of which I recorded the results. The questions posed to the focus group were designed to measure the impact particular illustrations had on the comprehension of the people of the sermonic point(s). I attempted to take into account the feedback of the focus group each week as I prepared the next message in the series.

Beginning with the ninth week of the project and continuing through week 13, I taught a group of teachers and lay-preachers to incorporate some of the insights I had

gained into their own ministries. During these sessions I taught a number of insights gained by me through my research and writing of chapters 2 and 3 of this project.

I concluded with a post-project congregational survey of the entire congregation during weeks 14 and 15 which was identical to the pre-project congregational survey. I believed it was important to keep both the same in order to more accurately measure potential changes in understanding.

### **Conclusion**

This project took a considerable amount of time and effort, but has already proven itself helpful to my preaching ministry. I have learned to look at preaching differently, I have learned to look at myself differently, and I have also learned to look at other people differently, all as a direct result of my work on this project. A preacher may never know how much is accomplished when he preaches the Word nor may he see the good which comes from the truth he shares. He must share out of a sense of obedience to his calling and the directives contained in the Word of God. If he gives his best in preparation and delivery, God is pleased even if the tangible results are not all that the preacher desires. The ultimate value of what a preacher says may never be known.

## CHAPTER 2

### A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR IMPROVING THE USE OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN EXPOSITORY PREACHING

The first chapter of this project established the context of ministry for which this project was produced. The First Baptist Church of Broomfield, Colorado, like all other churches, has a greater need for understanding biblical truth in a more thorough manner. It is therefore incumbent upon those who preach or teach in a local church setting to do so with excellence. Properly using illustrations can be a tremendous aid toward accomplishing this goal. The models and directives to do so are substantiated by both the Old and New Testaments. The purpose of this chapter is not to exhaust the many and varied Scriptures which establish precedent for using illustrations, but rather to give something of a glimpse into how biblical truth is often conveyed through this means.

Biblical truth is the context by which all other truth is to be understood. There is a sense in which all truth is, in fact, biblical truth. From the early chapters of Genesis, extending throughout the New Testament, the Word of God calls for clarity. One of the best devices to be used in bringing desired clarity is through the proper use of illustrations.

The expository preacher must view illustrations as his servant and not as his master. There is undeniable temptation to allow a good illustration to take control of the message, or perhaps allow an illustration to influence the exegesis of the Scripture

passage being studied. No illustration is to be valued above the Scripture text, but instead be lifted up as a means by which to assist human beings in growing in their faith and knowledge of God.

Early in Scripture God begins giving visual pictures of who he is and the truth he wants mankind to understand. The Old Testament, as a whole, offers much to support the thesis of this topic. The New Testament follows suit as concept after concept is brought to life through means of illustration. Throughout the Bible one can find great insight into the character of God by consideration of the great lengths to which he went in order to bring his Word down to a human level. It is believed that the preacher of the Word should seek to mimic God as much as possible in carrying out this process while still yet maintaining the prominent place of the Word itself without mixture of compromise.

The following passages were selected because it is the belief of this writer that each captures well the essence of relaying biblical truth in human terms, or “illustrating” that truth. There are many others which could have been selected, but these provide a small sampling of a nearly inexhaustible topic.

#### **Ecclesiastes 12:9-11**

Oral communication is one of the most important forms by which people impart knowledge to other people. Further, word choices can often either help or hinder that communication process. One who is clear and concise in speech is more rare than prevalent, but the preacher of the Word of God should be one who chooses his words carefully when delivering the message God would have his people to hear. The writer of Ecclesiastes writes in 12:9-11,

And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright – words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of scholars are like well driven nails, given by one Shepherd.

The text reveals that the preacher, a most likely reference to Solomon, specifically sought to find particular words which were more acceptable for his desired results than were other words. When making application to the ministry of a preacher in the modern day, the use of carefully chosen words should be employed. This, by no means, excludes but should include, the use of relatable illustrations of points within the course of the delivered message.

Renowned Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman writes, in reference to Solomon, “Not only was the teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> The imparting of knowledge is the goal of the preacher. He should never preach merely for the sake of preaching. This desired end should drive him to pursue further knowledge as well as the techniques by which to impart that knowledge and assist its ability to become alive in the hearts and minds of people. To accomplish this may include becoming knowledgeable on topics of which he would not otherwise have a great deal of interest.

The roles of preacher and teacher overlap in many regards. The preacher is to be not only one who *proclaims*, but also one who *teaches* with excellence. In Ecclesiastes, as Old Testament scholar Duane Garrett writes, “The role of Solomon as teacher is reaffirmed. Following his example, teachers must go ahead of pupils to seek out the truth and so convey it to their pupils. In addition, a teacher seeks to make his or

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<sup>1</sup>Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 277.

her words as palatable as possible and teachers in a way that communicates well.”<sup>2</sup> Simply possessing the knowledge would seem to be inadequate. One must not be satisfied until he has properly imparted knowledge. To put that knowledge in terms which may be understood is of absolute necessity for reaching the goal. There is also an unmistakable requirement of skill which is involved in accomplishing this task, and skills may certainly be further developed. Michael Eaton writes,

The Preacher’s skill at his task is set before us in three verbs: pondered, searched out, arranged. The first (literally ‘weighed,’ a rare word) points to careful evaluation, indicating his honesty, caution and balance; the second to thoroughness and diligence. The third, *arranged*, points to the skillful orderliness of his presentation and reminds us that there is an artistic element in his work (as in all preaching and writing).<sup>3</sup>

Particularly in the arrangement one sees the artistic element emerge. To further illustrate key points involves much consideration and effort on the part of the preacher.

To merely convey words of truth could be construed as being uncaring or unloving whereas making the extra effort to assure those words are actually being understood demonstrates a much higher level of pastoral concern. Eaton goes on, “The Preacher’s concerns were pastoral, not professional. Accordingly the knowledge he taught must be understood as more than accumulation of facts. It is closely related to discipline, skill and righteousness (Prov 1:7).”<sup>4</sup> Longman says, “It is impossible to say whether Qohelet is going above and beyond the call of duty in instructing the masses, or

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<sup>2</sup>Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, The New American Commentary, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 344.

<sup>3</sup>Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, vol. 16 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 153.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.



whether this is once again simply a description of his role as wisdom teacher.”<sup>5</sup> This writer tends to believe he did not see himself going beyond the call of duty, but rather viewed it *as* his duty. His role is one which is *set*, as opposed to being in a state of flux; however, his means do change and adapt. That is largely what it means to be “pastoral” in the execution of his duties. Caring enough to not only seek out God and his truth, but further seek out man at whatever point he might be. In this is the wisdom of a preacher with the heart of a pastor. Duane Garrett writes, “All true wisdom comes from the ‘one Shepherd’ (God); again the choice of metaphor is deliberately pastoral.”<sup>6</sup>

Ideally, there would appear to be the perfect blending of hard truth with understandable words to convey the essence of that truth to the hearer. Keil and Delitzsch write,

It is further said of Koheleth, that he put forth efforts not only to find words of a pleasant form, but above all exact truth . . . he strove, according to his best knowledge and conscience, to write true words, at the same time also to find out pleasing words; thus sought to connect truth as to the manner with beauty as to the manner. Thus it is said that Koheleth directed his effort towards an attractive form; but, before all towards the truth, both subjectively (ישר) and objectively (אמת), of that which was formulated and expressed in writing.<sup>7</sup>

Biblical truth is the highest standard which must be served, but in service to that truth, the impartation of knowledge must be certain. This work involves a conscious, concerted effort on the part of the preacher. Eaton writes, “The Preacher (or his editor) is conscious of his own activity (v. 10) with regard to both the form (v. 9) and the content (v. 10) of

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<sup>5</sup>Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 277.

<sup>6</sup>Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 344.

<sup>7</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 6:809-10.

his work; yet he contends that the finished product is the Word of God as well as the word of man.”<sup>8</sup> Some level of the blending of the two aspects appears to be the ideal.

The preacher learns truth as he studies, but it must be understood by him first in terms he can process. According to Haddon Robinson’s classic definition of expository preaching, the Holy Spirit must first apply truth to the personality and experience of the preacher.<sup>9</sup> Therefore the product, first of all, of his own private study should be his own understanding. He then desires to reproduce that understanding in others by means of the tools available to him. He largely becomes convicted then convinced by the truth as he is steered toward it rather than away. Often that steering is difficult, even painful. Longman writes,

The frame narrator likens wisdom teaching to the goads that prod cattle into line and nails that are firmly fixed in their place. He also names their source as coming from a shepherd. In other words, the frame narrator uses figurative language to describe the origin and effects of wisdom teaching. One of the major tasks for the interpreter of this verse is to unpack the meaning of the image.<sup>10</sup>

The pastor, in the New Testament, is often pictured as a shepherd. The shepherd is seen to be one who simply “cares enough” to take the time to unpack what would seem to be “hidden” meaning. To a large degree he has the task of even “goading” persons toward biblical truth which, like the nail, is firmly fixed in its place. Garrett clarifies, “Goads, refer to the pointed sticks used to keep cattle moving in the right direction and so serve to represent moral guidance and stimulus in human affairs.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 154.

<sup>9</sup>See Chapter 1, n. 14.

<sup>10</sup>Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 278-79.

<sup>11</sup>Garrett, *Ecclesiastes*, 344.

General leadership is not in view here, but instead a particular type of leadership which involves only pointing persons toward biblical truth. Longman writes, “At least as early as the Targum to the book it has been suggested that the images are positive: ‘The words of the wise are like inciting goads and forks, which incite those who are destitute of knowledge to learn wisdom as the goad teaches the ox.’”<sup>12</sup> In the words of the writer of Ecclesiastes it is easy to see the desperate importance of conveying biblical truth to those who are so desperate to understand. “Dull” concepts will be quickly forgotten, but those things which are sharp, clear, direct, pointed, etc. will likely create the desired impact.

#### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

Amid the 48 chapters which comprise the writing of the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37 is the most well-known. The prophet is transported to a particular valley in which God shows him a strange and frightful vision. Bones that are bleached white and exceedingly dry become assembled into skeletons then regain flesh and finally come back to life. This vision is a depiction of the power of God and his promise to restore dead people to life. The specific application here is for his own chosen people who were suffering in Babylonian captivity at the time.

In addition to the valley of dry bones in chapter 37, the Book of Ezekiel contains a number of illustrative events including a unique and strange portrayal of God in 1:1-28, a portrayal of the abominations taking place in the temple in 8:1-18, a depiction of people being slain in Jerusalem in 9:1-11, of the temple and the cherubim in 10:1-22, of twenty-five wicked rulers in 11:1-12, and the temple in 40:1-43:10.

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<sup>12</sup>Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 279-80.

Frequently, throughout the prophets God spoke by means of his men living out visual illustrations of truth.

This moment was a bleak one in the history of the nation. God however, had an undeniable purpose to encourage them through Ezekiel as he depicted he would not leave them in their desperate situation. This vision was an illustration of his unmistakable care and concern at a moment when it was certainly in doubt. Lamar Eugene Cooper writes,

What a marvelous message of encouragement this was, both to Ezekiel and to the people in exile. If the prophet remained faithful to his call and proclaimed the Word of God, the ultimate consequence would be a life-transforming experience that would result in a national resurrection. There is no finer illustration of the life-changing power of the preached word than what the prophet saw in his vision. It has the power to transform those who are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1-22) and make them new, living creatures in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). God has always used the ‘foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe’ (1 Cor 1:21)<sup>13</sup>

John B. Taylor adds, “Ezekiel had been promising his people a change in their fortunes: new leadership, a restored land, rebuilt cities, and many of the features of the Messianic era.”<sup>14</sup> Inexplicably, yet often, the message and the illustration of that message are linked together by the perfect design of God.

Although it is easy for a Christian of the New Testament era to see imagery pertaining to the resurrection of Christ from the dead, in its immediate context neither Ezekiel nor his audience would have likely recognized it as such a foreshadowing.

Their most immediate concern was to have some hope. Specifically that their present

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<sup>13</sup>Lamar Eugene Cooper Sr., *Ezekiel*, The New American Commentary, vol. 17 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1994), 325.

<sup>14</sup>John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, vol. 20 (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1969), 234.

suffering would be alleviated and that they would one day be restored. When considering the illustrative prominence of this great text, one must not overreach beyond where the illustration leads. This becomes a universal principle as preachers labor to connect with their audiences. A good illustration has boundaries. Too many specifically have taken the concept of resurrection much further than the text in Ezekiel 37.

Much portrayal may be seen in this text. Ezekiel, almost inexplicably, becomes tied to, or even a part of the message. Daniel Block writes, “Each example portrays him being physically led around the visionary scene by Yahweh (or by his representative). In this vision his involvement is even more dramatic as his own activity and speech actually affect the events envisioned.”<sup>15</sup> An effective preacher may become so in tune with the message that it becomes deeply personal and the emotional aspects are not contrived but genuine. His illustrations of the Word may be personal and may evoke deep emotional reaction in him before they ever become known to his hearers. This intertwining with the message, through illustration, gives strong precedent for a modern preacher becoming strikingly immersed in the message he preaches.

There is something about an illustration which tends to make the image more permanent in the mind. The particular pictures given in this vision, give the message a far more lasting quality and weighty impact. Such details as the “extreme” dryness of the bones (v. 2) represent the fact they had been dead for a long time, adding even more richness to the imagery. Block points out, “The image concretizes the hopelessness expressed in v. 11 . . . The picture is one of death in all its horror, intensity, and

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<sup>15</sup>Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel Chapters 25-48*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 372.

finality.”<sup>16</sup> But as the image of death is driven home, so also is the image of life, essentially swinging the pendulum back the other direction.

Illustrating biblical truth can often attain the peaks of human emotion. Many argue that well-delivered and well-illustrated sermons will do that very thing. Clearly Ezekiel 37:1-14 demonstrates in its totality the ingenuity of illustration being linked to the message itself.

### **Hosea 3:1**

One further sees the truth of God illustrated in the Old Testament book of Hosea. This book serves to illustrate the inexhaustible nature of the love of God for the people of his covenant. Further, to demonstrate the foolish nature of a wayward, adulterous people. God could have simply told his people the truth and left it as such, but instead his love for them compelled him to choose to reveal a deeper and richer picture of his love. He did so by means of giving a real and living example played out through his prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer who is identified in the text as a harlot. The prophet recounts in 3:1 “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go again, love a woman who is loved by a lover and is committing adultery, just like the love of the Lord for the children of Israel, who look to other gods and love the raisin cakes of the pagans.’”

Hosea has been viewed historically from a variety of viewpoints. John Calvin, for instance, viewed the book of Hosea as only a vision to illustrate the truth of the waywardness of the nation. He writes,

There is no doubt but that God describes here the favor he promises to the Israelites in a type or vision: for they are too gross in their notions who think that the prophet married a woman who had been a harlot. It was then only a vision, as though God had set a picture before the eyes of the people, in which they might see their own

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 374.

conduct.<sup>17</sup>

Calvin's view puts the account of Hosea and Gomer as a visionary illustration of God's continued love for his people in spite of their habitual sin, while maintaining that the events portrayed in the book never really took place. Although this writer disagrees with the hermeneutic of Calvin, it is still true that the illustration itself is highly appropriate.

James Montgomery Boice, who takes the book as literal, takes the position that the real point cannot be gleaned without a serious focus on the Christocentricity of the passage. He sees the emphasis squarely on God's promised redeemer. He writes "Hosea 3 shows us God's work of redemption – the work by which the Lord Jesus Christ delivered us from sin's bondage at the cost of His own life – portrayed in Hosea's purchase of his fallen wife from slavery."<sup>18</sup> Once again, there is a fair amount of variance in the interpretation of the book, however it is almost universally agreed upon that the book of Hosea serves to illustrate truth from God concerning his love.

Love undeniably abounds in the book of Hosea. The essence of the book is captured well in Hosea 3:1. The object of love ultimately is seen in the matchless love of God for his people illustrated through the love of Hosea toward Gomer. Douglas Stuart writes, "The verb (אהב) 'to love/show love' occurs four times in the verse, dominating its vocabulary."<sup>19</sup> The Old Testament talks about love at various points, but nowhere is it perhaps illustrated as vividly and in such graphic terms as it is in Hosea. The new wife of

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<sup>17</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on Daniel 7-12 and Hosea, Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 13, ed. and trans. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, n.d; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 123.

<sup>18</sup>James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets: Two Volumes in One Edition* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 28.

<sup>19</sup>Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 31 (Nashville: Thomas-Nelson, 1987), 65.

Hosea does not deserve his love, but she will receive it regardless. In the book of Deuteronomy the Lord offers some insight in regards to his choosing of Israel in the first place. That which is portrayed in Hosea is largely an elaborate illustration of his declarative statements from Deuteronomy 7:6ff.

For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all people; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers . . . . Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments.

The love Hosea had for Gomer was, in no regard, based on any sort of merit she possessed. Stuart writes, “Israel does not deserve Yahweh’s love, but he has been showing it to her all along – and will continue to do so both during and by means of the long season of disruption he will impose on her.”<sup>20</sup>

The love of God is enormous to a degree that it cannot be understood fully, but through means of illustration a reasonably clear picture can be displayed. The love of Yahweh for his people is quite complex. While Israel is the object of his devotion, they trivialize his love by their pursuit of sweet pleasures illustrated by way of the “raisin cakes.” Stuart writes, “Yahweh loves Israel in that he is loyal to her as a nation. This ‘love’ is a technical covenantal term for a relationship of loyalty. Israel takes delight in/prefers/likes raisin cakes.”<sup>21</sup> He goes on, “Raisin cakes (אשישי עכבים), sweets made from pressed and dried grapes, were prized as a delicacy. By Hosea’s time they were

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.



probably routinely associated with cultic worship, the fitting metaphorical food of the religious nymphomaniac who seeks material gratification from other gods than Yahweh.”<sup>22</sup>

The waywardness of the nation, illustrated here in terms of marital infidelity, which is seen as the most serious type of unfaithfulness, has become blight upon this people. While the love of God is continually pictured as noble, steadfast, and enduring the unfaithfulness of the people is seen as abhorrent, defenseless, and inexcusable. Stuart writes, “Yahweh’s love for Israel is noble, unselfish, generous, and protective. Israel’s love for its raisin cakes and the adulteress’s love for evil are selfish, indulgent, pleasure-oriented.”<sup>23</sup>

Hosea 3:1 is as sad as it is ironic. How could God, who has loved so extensively, be treated with such indifference, even with malicious intent all in the name of pleasure and the further pursuit of pleasure? How could something so sacred be treated with such commonality? Garrett writes,

The phrase ‘love the sacred raisin cakes’ again paraphrases the Hebrew – ‘sacred’ is not part of the original text. But it is almost comical to modern readers that Yahweh is distressed because the Israelites ‘love raisin cakes.’ Yahweh’s grief over Israel has nothing to do with their choice in desserts. It is possible, but unlikely, that the subject of ‘love the sacred raisin cakes’ is not the Israelites themselves but the gods whom they honor. It is more probable that the Israelites themselves are the ones who love the raisin cakes but that the significance of the cakes lies in their context and purpose.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, The New American Commentary, vol. 19a (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 99-100.

The human mind often experiences great difficulty at the point of grasping biblical truth. The Israelites should have known of the jealousy of Yahweh merely from their knowledge of the Torah, however knowledge is likely not the issue in view as much as is what they were actually doing or not doing with the knowledge they possessed. Hosea's prophecy is largely an indictment upon their lack of concern for the sacred. While God pursued them with incomparable love and devotion, they concerned themselves with desserts! David Allan Hubbard observes,

While Yahweh is loving the Israelites, what are they loving? Raisin cakes! It can be illustrated through human love when that human love has grasped something of the power and pathos of the divine – the commandment of Hosea assumes a correspondence between the divine and the human; what Hosea has learned about the forgiving, restoring love of Yahweh from the salvation speech (2:14-23) he is to teach others by his love for an adulteress; it is commitment and action, commanded with a divine imperative; and it is strong as well as tender and has the courage and integrity to exercise discipline when that is necessary.<sup>25</sup>

Divine love is a mystery and remains a mystery until God chooses to reveal some insight into that love. The only means by which God imparts this knowledge of his favor, comes by means of his illustrating it to sinful man. Whether it is the Israelites of old or modern mankind, God reveals his truth in consistent, reasonable terms. The expository preacher can take comfort in knowing that as he gleans and relates biblical truth he is operating in a manner largely consistent with the historic methods and means of Yahweh.

### **Acts 17:28**

The New Testament also reveals a pattern of illustration of biblical truth by means consistent with how people relate to concepts and thereby gain understanding.

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<sup>25</sup>David Allan Hubbard, *Hosea*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, vol. 22a (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press), 1989.

The most noteworthy pattern of this is found in the teachings of Jesus, particularly the parables. Because of his being divine, it is beyond the scope of this project to explore the specific genre of the parable and examine how it does or does not parallel with modern use of illustrations in expository preaching. Jesus was unique and he taught in a manner which was also unique, however we can glean generally from his parabolic teachings that he did hold the art of illustrating and/or simplifying truth in high esteem.

The New Testament writers use a great deal of imagery to pin down truth. It is true in the four gospel accounts, Acts, the Pauline epistles, the general epistles, and certainly in the apocalyptic literature of Revelation. The Apostle Paul is perhaps the best known user of familiar imagery apart from Jesus. He often used images of athletics and the military to clarify his teaching.

In Acts 17, the historian Luke writes of Paul's encounter with certain Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens at the Areopagus. In the recorded exchange between Paul and these men, Paul reaches out to them by means of affirming them as much as possible. Without compromising biblical truth, he maintains a high level of respect for these men, as well as their position and beliefs. He appears to meet them where they are. In verse 28 his words to them are, in reference to the one true God, "For in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, 'for we are also His offspring.'"

The world of biblical truth was not a world to which these men could yet relate, however they were familiar with their own history, philosophy, religion, etc. Paul takes that which would have been familiar to them and uses it to introduce biblical truth. This encounter serves to help establish a principle that illustrations, secular or otherwise,

of the familiar can and do serve to teach principles of biblical truth. “Paul had no scriptural text for his sermon. The Old Testament would have carried little weight with the pagans of Athens. So Paul ‘took his text,’ so to speak, from a pagan philosopher.”<sup>26</sup> By quoting these particular poets, Paul is bringing the more complex down to their level. In this process, he is affirming them, but *not* their belief system. He is slyly using, to the benefit of his argument, the traditional understanding of these men to illustrate his point.

The reference to their poets was not his endorsement of their common understanding. “By quoting these poets Paul is not intimating that he agrees with the pagan setting in which the citations flourished. Rather, he uses the words to fit his Christian teaching.”<sup>27</sup> Further, the particular point he was making by quoting their poets was, as John MacArthur points out, to point them toward God. He writes,

God’s providential activity as creator, ruler, giver, and controller should move men to seek Him. Reason should send them from the greatest effect (the universe) back to the first cause – God. In all that He has done in creating and sustaining the universe, God has revealed Himself to mankind. Such self-disclosure should encourage men to grope for Him and find Him.<sup>28</sup>

In a not so subtle way, Paul was pressing them for some type of resolve in their own minds where God was concerned. MacArthur goes on to write:

The Greeks certainly could not plead ignorance. Even their poets acknowledged the revelation of God in nature, though they wrongly saw it as a revelation of their false gods. The Cretan poet Epimenides noted that ‘in Him we live and move and exist,’ while Aratus, from Paul’s home region of Cilicia, added, ‘For we also are His offspring.’ Those quotes illustrate the universal revelation of God as creator, ruler, and sustainer. While Paul could easily have documented

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<sup>26</sup>John Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 211.

<sup>27</sup>Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 637.

<sup>28</sup>John MacArthur, *Acts 13-28, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 140.

those truths from the Old Testament, he chose instead illustrations familiar to his pagan audience, who were unfamiliar with scripture.<sup>29</sup>

Their issue was not one of failing to recognize a higher being, but rather of recognizing the *identity* of that higher being. Paul recognized an opportunity here with these men as verse 21 reveals, “For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing.” His illustration(s) to them are largely birthed out of opportunity.

Origins were a major issue to these philosophers. Historically mankind has wrestled with issues related to where he has come from and even for what purpose. Further, how and why is life sustained in the manner in which it is sustained? Boice writes, “If God has revealed himself to us in creation, as he has, and if God sustains creation (including ourselves), and if God has determined the bounds of our habitations and our destiny, which Paul declares to be the case, it follows that we have an obligation to seek God out and find him.”<sup>30</sup>

By quoting their poets Paul is turning that which they already knew against them, for the sake of his argument, thereby to get them to reprocess through a different grid, already established truth. The reality itself was not in question, but the circumstances leading up to that reality was the issue. It was not a question of “did” it happen, that was already agreed upon, but rather “why” it happened.

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 141.

<sup>30</sup>James Montgomery Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 298.

Any good illustration causes people to think. The more deeply it causes them to think, arguably the better and more effective the illustration. Paul's purpose here was to get these men to think and rethink about why things were as they are.

### **Romans 10:14**

In Romans 9-11 Paul laments the fact that his fellow "countrymen" have rejected Christ. He emphasizes their need to embrace the good news and be saved. In chapter 11 he points out, encouragingly that this rejection by the nation is not total. He lifts himself up as an example of one who God chose for salvation and further, to bring the message of salvation in Christ to the nation. He largely views himself as a mouthpiece for Christ and a product of the incomparable grace of God as he proclaims the love of God and his wide acceptance of people. Clearly he sees a great degree of hope for all persons who repent of their sins and come to Christ in faith, particularly in view here is the nation of Israel.

As Paul progresses through this section there is seemingly a greater and greater emphasis which builds on the important role of the preacher as he is set apart to bring the gospel to those who need to hear and receive its truth. In verse 14 he writes, "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?"

Paul, in spite of his pedigree, was by no means an elitist. He had traveled down a path which took him from feeling superior to a state of nothingness, then had been, in essence, re-built by God, carefully crafted for a special work. His present was both uniquely informed and influenced by his past and served him well to inspire a compassionate heart for those who were still yet dead in trespasses and sins. These were the ones who were hopelessly separated from God, apart from the intervening *work* of

God. His desire was to not only proclaim the truth of the Gospel but to actually influence the lives of people with the Gospel. Commentator William Hendriksen writes, “The apostle was not only a fully inspired very learned, deep-thinking theologian; he was also a very practical, warm-hearted Christian friend . . . he is thinking of the audience, the one in Rome, to be sure, but along the line of the centuries to follow, any audience, including also today’s.”<sup>31</sup> His frequent appeals were designed to produce faith in the lives of people, thereby leading to results. On the authority of Christ he makes appeal after appeal to people to believe the message. F. F. Bruce writes, “But if the disappointed messenger asks, ‘who has believed our message?’ It is evident that the message was designed to produce faith. And the message itself rests for its authority on the direct command and commission of Christ.”<sup>32</sup>

This passage alludes to a very practical side of both the message and the audience. Not only is the truth to be presented but it is to be done so with urgency and in a manner which is practically understood. Bruce writes,

Men and women are urged to call on the name of the Lord and be saved; but they will not call on his name unless they have been moved to believe in him, they cannot believe in him unless they hear about him, they cannot hear about him unless someone brings them the news, and no-one can bring them the news unless he is commissioned to do so.<sup>33</sup>

The expectation of the preacher is that his message would resonate with his hearers. If the meaning escapes the hearers little has been accomplished from a pragmatic point of

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<sup>31</sup>William Hendriksen, *Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980; reprint 2004), 349.

<sup>32</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 6 (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 194.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 193.

view. The preacher, in similar manner to the apostles who came before him, is sent out with a message. Bruce goes on,

The preacher is an ‘apostle’ in the primary sense of the word: he is a herald or ambassador conveying a message from someone who has commissioned him to deliver it. Here Paul magnifies the office of the gospel preacher; it is God’s good pleasure by their proclamation of his amnesty to bring his mercy home to those who believe the message.”<sup>34</sup>

Hendriksen aptly points out, “Genuine preaching, therefore, means that the sermon is lively, not dry; timely, not stale. It is the earnest proclamation of the great news initiated by God.”<sup>35</sup> The clarity of message is significantly aided by placing biblical truth in a context by which the average individual processes to his or her benefit. Without the truth being placed within this context it often fades, as quickly as it appears. John MacArthur writes, “The capstone of Paul’s argument in this passage is that a clear message which gives understanding of the truth must precede saving faith.”<sup>36</sup> If the truth is not clear and understandable, although it has purpose and meaning, it is of no practical value.

The preacher is a messenger sent by God with a purpose, in much the same way the apostles were sent out into the world. The Great Commission given to them by the Lord Jesus was not only to “proclaim” but also to “teach.” Teaching itself has almost always been universally understood as more than mere proclamation or delivery of information. Implied within the imperative to “teach,” is the requirement to help hearers

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 193-94.

<sup>35</sup>Hendriksen, *Romans*, 350.

<sup>36</sup>John MacArthur, *Romans 9-16, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 83.



understand the proclaimed information. Those trained theologically bear a responsibility to be facilitators of learning for others. In Acts 8:26ff. there is recorded an encounter between Philip and a certain Ethiopian eunuch. The man was sitting in a chariot and reading from the book of Isaiah. Verse 29 says, “Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go near and overtake this chariot.’” In verse 30 he asks the man, “Do you understand what you are reading?” The Ethiopian replied in verse 31, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” In large measure the task of the preacher is the task assigned to Philip by an angel of the Lord (v. 26). Both being called to this task and being equipped to carry out the task are great honors bestowed by God. Whether it be Philip, Paul, or any preacher called by God, even today, it is significant.

### **2 Corinthians 4:7**

The apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to the church at Corinth, as recorded in 4:7, “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.” Here Paul is drawing the sharpest of contrasts between the infinite and incomprehensible truth of the gospel and the common, insignificant beings that are mankind. The glory of God is seen most clearly when man, by contrast, is seen in his *truest* essence; mankind is seen most clearly when God, by contrast, is seen in his *truest* essence.

Illustrations highlight the reality which already exists; they do not create reality but merely work within its boundaries. Throughout this process, God is exalted by means of man gaining a better understanding of both himself and of God. Geoffrey Wilson states, “For it is God’s purpose to show that this power cannot be ascribed to the weak

vessels in which it is contained, but that it belongs continually to him from whom it comes.”<sup>37</sup>

In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul, as Simon Kistemaker points out, “uses an illustration taken from everyday life: clay pots that contained everything from wealth to worthless things, from foods to liquids.”<sup>38</sup> He goes on to write, “Jewish rabbis used to say: ‘It is impossible for wine to be kept in gold or silver vessels but in the most inferior of containers, namely, in earthen vessels.’”<sup>39</sup> The most precious treasures would commonly be stored in quite common ware. The value of the contents was, in no way, diminished by the plain nature or appearance of the container. It could even be observed that the value was highlighted by the obvious contrast. Colin G. Kruse is helpful as he explains,

Earthenware vessels were commonplace in virtually every home in the ancient Middle East. They were inexpensive and easily broken. Unlike metal vessels (which would be repaired) or glass ones (which could be melted down and the material reused), once broken, earthen ware vessels had to be discarded. They were thus cheap and of little intrinsic value. Paul may have had in mind the small earthen ware oil-lamps sold so cheaply in the market-places. If so, ‘the light of the gospel’ would be the treasure, while the apostles in their frailty would be the earthenware lamps from whom the light was made to shine in the world.<sup>40</sup>

This contrast is of an enormity beyond words. The purpose of Paul, according to Charles Hodge, “Is to show, on the one hand, how weak he is, how truly a mere earthen vessel,

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<sup>37</sup>Geoffrey B. Wilson, *2 Corinthians: A Digest of Reformed Comment* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1973), 52.

<sup>38</sup>Simon J. Kistemaker, *2 Corinthians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker 1997), 146.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup>Colin G. Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentary, vol. 8 (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 106.

and, on the other hand, how great and manifest God's power is, that in the following verses he contrasts his trials and his deliverances."<sup>41</sup>

The testimony of Paul, which he shared three times in the book of Acts, was a visual illustration of the work God had, not only accomplished in his life, but of the way God so often manifests himself in general. It is the impossible becoming the possible; it is the incomprehensible becoming comprehensible; it is certain death, becoming life; it is hopeless man having hope; it is a previously unknown God becoming known. The ministry of the gospel is about unveiling the unknown God to sinful creatures. It is placing priceless treasure in clay pots for safe keeping. Hodge writes,

But the ministry of the gospel which faith had received, and of which he had in such exalted terms . . . was a ministration of life, of power, and of glory. It revealed the grandest truths. It produced the most astonishing effects. It freed men from the condemnation and power of sin; it transformed them into the image of Christ; it delivered them from the power of the god of this world, and made them partakers of eternal life. These are effects which infinitely transcend all human power; and to render this fact conspicuous God has committed this treasure to *earthen vessels*.<sup>42</sup>

The spiritual knowledge and wisdom of Paul was great. It was highly informed and shaped by his own experience. To a large degree he viewed himself as a living illustration of the theology and anthropology he proclaimed. MacArthur observes, "Paul was not at all lacking in spiritual knowledge. God delights in using humble, common people, those who are overlooked by society. He places in such clay pots the incalculable treasure of the gospel."<sup>43</sup> It is noteworthy that God, not only uses, but

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<sup>41</sup>Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, The Geneva Series Commentary (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1958; reprint 1994), 468.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 467-68.

<sup>43</sup>John MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2003), 141.

actually prefers to use the least likely people and circumstances to accomplish his purposes is significant and speaks to his own character.

Throughout his New Testament epistles, it is common for Paul to draw comparisons with athletics and with military service, seeing that these things were appropriate conveyances to impart “treasure” to “clay pots.” Paul, or any other preacher of the gospel, has the ability to wax eloquent and speak above the heads of the people, however little is accomplished if biblical truth does not come in terms which may be related and understood. When this occurs, and often it has, it is an exercise in futility. It is the “grasping at the wind” of which the preacher in Ecclesiastes writes. It is the history of the Roman Catholic mass given in Latin to congregants who did not understand the language. The weakness of man and his ability to grasp spiritual truth, is in itself an illustration of a biblical truth. The truth being that man is nothing more than a clay pot, whereas God and his incomparable Word is the most valuable of treasure.

Kistemaker writes, “Commenting on his physical weakness and Christ’s power, Paul affirms that when he is weak, the divine power of Christ is resting on him. The authority of the gospel is not human in origin but has its source in God.”<sup>44</sup> He goes on, “We hold the gospel as it were in clay jars to exhibit the phenomenal power of God, so that everyone may see that not we but God is its source.”<sup>45</sup> All the attention is directed toward God and not man. If an illustration exalts the preacher specifically, or man in general, it is not a biblical illustration but rather a diversion or digression from the message God would have for his people.

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<sup>44</sup>Kistemaker, *2 Corinthians*, 147.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

Many of the purposes of God can be seen not only in the things which he does but also in the means by which he does the things. MacArthur points out, “By using fallible people, God makes it clear that the power lies not in the human messenger but in the divine message. God’s power transcends the limitations of the clay pot. And it is precisely those limitations that allow Christians to experience the greatest demonstration of God’s power.”<sup>46</sup> The contrast between man and God is not often clearly seen or understood by the average non-Christian. Understanding the enormous gulf which exists is the first step in recognizing the need for the one who bridges that gulf – the person of Jesus Christ. The world of the New Testament era, as well as that of the average person today, sees little need for a personal relationship with a savior. Mankind, now as always, has essentially trusted in himself for his own deliverance while God or any concept of God is kept quietly in the background. MacArthur writes,

The world is filled with people too enamored with their own cleverness, importance, and ability to be used by God. But when God chose the men through whom he would give his Word to mankind, he did not choose the learned scholars of Alexandria, the distinguished philosophers of Athens, the eloquent orators of Rome, or the self-righteous religious leaders of Israel. He passed them all by in favor of simple Galilean fishermen like Peter, John, James, and Andrew, despised traitors like Matthew the tax collector, and obscure men like Philip, Mark, and Nathaniel. Even the educated people He chose, such as Luke the physician and Paul, the rabbinic scholar, were humble, unimposing people. To those common earthen vessels God entrusted the priceless treasure of the gospel.<sup>47</sup>

A humble preacher of the gospel still yet today sees himself merely as a clay pot chosen by God to reveal the wonderful truth God has for his people. His task is monumental and can never be accomplished by himself. Truly it is a God-sized effort.

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<sup>46</sup>MacArthur, *2 Corinthians*, 142.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 141-42.

The labor of preaching should have, above all else, a humbling effect on the man chosen. Never should he be so arrogant as to believe he is anything more than a clay pot transferring the information of God to other clay pots in an earthy, this worldly manner.

Paul was well aware of the limitations both he and all of mankind were operating within. He recounted in 2 Corinthians 12:9 how he had asked the Lord on 3 occasions to remove, what he terms a “thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me.” It is widely believed this is a reference to poor eyesight, perhaps blindness from which he suffered. Within such biographical insights provided by the apostle, it is not difficult to see why Paul could refer to mankind, as a whole, in such “earthy” or “this worldly” terms. “Clay pots” were largely a metaphor for the context in which he viewed himself, and subsequently all of mankind.

### **Conclusion**

Biblical truth stands on its own; however, throughout the pages of Scripture a common means by which that same truth was presented was the use of some type of illustration. These illustrated truths come in a variety of forms, nevertheless the larger concept to bear in mind is that God has chosen to use the tool of illustration in order to assist his covenant people in comprehending enough of himself in order to garner a personal relationship with him. Illustrations do have their limitations and weaknesses. They can even be crude at times and, at their worst, may possibly even serve to conceal the truths of God, however by and large these are means to serve the greater purpose of the furtherance of the Kingdom of God in this world.

## CHAPTER 3

### PRINCIPLES AND EXAMPLES OF HOW TO ILLUSTRATE POINTS IN EXPOSITORY PREACHING

The modern age is an age of visualization. People are exposed to high-budget television advertising, eye-catching billboards, clever radio spots, high quality email graphics, video and PowerPoint presentations, etc. Anyone under the age of 30 has hardly a memory of what life was like before the modernistic developments in advertising. Even those who are now middle age and older have largely become accustomed to presentations of stellar quality.

Illustrating is done in a number of ways. These can take the form of an image on a screen or can be a description or story which imparts a mental image to the mind of the hearer or reader. Radio, for instance, has cleverly done this for nearly a century. The success of radio dramas relied heavily on the willingness of people to allow their minds to be open and impressionable. The popularity of these dramas has largely faded but the overriding principle remains. People understand, or learn better when they are able to visualize.

People are in need of truth, but they also need that truth to be presented in a format they can understand. The human mind needs an image, or example of that which is being offered. In his handbook on public speaking, Duane Litfin writes, “One of the most common types of supporting material is the *example*. According to the dictionary

an example is ‘something selected to show the nature or character of the rest.’ Thus an example is always a particular specimen or instance of the more general point it is designed to illustrate.”<sup>1</sup>

Historically, many voices in the church have rejected the use of secular techniques in the church. Some argue that PowerPoint, for instance, is a distraction to the message. Some argue that this form of media has been brought over from the world of business. But there is little doubt that visual learners have frequently benefited from a device such as PowerPoint. Whether it is the electronic conveyances of this generation, or the flannel-graph and chalk drawings of another, people are, aided in learning, when and if they are able to visualize and as mental images are created in their minds.

The sermons preached by preachers today need to be well illustrated in order to connect to people in the present generation. Skillfully illustrating sermon points takes considerable time and effort but is necessary. John Koessler writes, “Many sermons are not well-illustrated, and I think the reason is that illustrating takes time and work, added to all the other elements of sermon preparation.”<sup>2</sup> A good illustration is worth the effort as it tends to grip a person and is not quickly forgotten. Koessler goes on, “Many illustrations we hear are easy; they came quickly to the preacher’s mind and are not sharpened well. Quite often it seems that the illustration isn’t quite focused enough – a

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<sup>1</sup>Duane Litfin, *Public Speaking: A Handbook for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, fifth printing 1999), 207.

<sup>2</sup>Lee Eclov, “Lessons from Preaching Today Screeners: Ten Criteria used by our Experts to Choose the best Sermons,” Article quoting John Koessler In *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching*. Eds. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 705-06.



little too general. It fits the sermon like those baggy jeans on a teenage boy.”<sup>3</sup> In his massive compilation, *Encyclopedia of 15,000 Illustrations*, Paul Lee Tan writes in the preface to the book, “Everyone appreciates a good illustration. The right illustration at the right time is half the battle for many preachers and teachers. Congregations have come to life, tears, or wholesome laughter, at an illustration fittingly given.”<sup>4</sup> Some may argue that merely *preaching* or *truth conveyance* is enough to stand alone but as Stephen Brown points out, “It behooves any communicator of a message from God to tell stories, too. No matter how accurate our truth or how deep our message, if there are no illustrations, we have missed the very clear methodology of God: to make truth relevant with stories that illustrate that truth.”<sup>5</sup> A preacher must not only understand biblical truth, in order to illustrate, but must also have an understanding of both the original audience and the contemporary audience.

### **Knowing the Needs of the Original Audience**

It has often been said, when it comes to interpreting Scripture, that before you can understand what a passage *means*, you must first understand what a passage *meant* in its original context to its original audience. Exposition must precede illustration but, sermon preparation does not end with exposition. Warren Wiersbe writes, “A balanced

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 706.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 15,000 Illustrations* (Dallas: Bible Communications, INC., 1998), 9.

<sup>5</sup>Stephen Brown, “Illustrating the Sermon,” in *Handbook of Contemporary Preaching: A Wealth of Counsel for Creative and Effective Proclamation*, ed. Michael Dudit (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 199.

ministry of the Word requires both concept and image.”<sup>6</sup> There is an unmistakable temptation to skip ahead to application in a modern context before a passage has been properly interpreted and understood in its original context. Jack Kuhatschek writes, “In a sense, studying and applying the Bible is like entering a time machine. We must cross the barriers of time, language, culture and geography in order to understand the people of the Bible and how God’s Word applied to the situations *they* faced.”<sup>7</sup> When properly interpreted, the application can change dramatically from what it may have appeared upon first impression. Many interpreters of Scripture may find it irrelevant to take the time to ascertain the background information and context in which a Scripture passage was written, but it is absolutely necessary before proper application can be made to the present day. Daniel Doriani writes, “Try to understand biblical writers on their own terms. Enter their culture, their way of thinking, their tradition. Join the world of the Bible as best you can.”<sup>8</sup> Providing appropriate illustrations is all but impossible until the proper interpretation is made and the context and setting is understood.

### **Knowing the Background and Setting of a Particular Scripture**

Every single passage in the Bible was written within a specific context. The majority of the time the concepts given would have been readily understood by the immediate audience. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart point out,

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<sup>6</sup>Warren Wiersbe, *Preaching and Teaching with Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996; reprint, 2001), 52 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

<sup>7</sup>Jack Kuhatschek, *Applying the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 38-39.

<sup>8</sup>Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), 26.

The study of historical context reminds us that the Bible was originally written for people whose world differed greatly from ours. It reminds us that everything the Bible says to us, it said first to them, so that the Word comes to us almost secondhand. The study of historical context grants us access to worlds of mysterious sayings, customs, and problems. It also prevents errors by reminding us that everything the Bible means today it first meant to someone else. So a text cannot mean today what it never meant to the original audience. Applications *can* change, of course. ‘You shall not steal’ now covers microwave ovens and computer software. But every principle we find in the Bible must be one they could have found first.<sup>9</sup>

It is the responsibility of a modern interpreter to determine what that original audience would have understood, to the greatest degree possible, before presenting his findings to a modern audience and illustrating those concepts. Examples of this can even be seen within the pages of Scripture. Certain portions of Scripture cite, and are even used to illustrate, truth taught in *other* portions of Scripture. In many instances Scripture becomes, not only commentary on other Scripture, but also serves to illustrate. Doriani points to some examples of these occurrences:

In Matthew 12:1-8 Jesus tells the Pharisees that they should know from David’s eating of the showbread when he fled Saul’s court (1 Sam 21) that God desires mercy and not sacrifice. Paul commanded the Corinthians to take heed from the rebellion of Israel in the wilderness: ‘Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.’ Therefore, Paul continues, ‘Do not be idolaters . . . [or] commit sexual immorality . . . [or] grumble, as some of them did’ (1 Cor 10:1-10). Hebrews brings a similar warning from those days (Heb 3:7-4:11). Hebrews 11 summons old-covenant heroes as a cloud of witnesses who exhort the church not to shrink back but to continue to run the race (Heb 10:35-12:2). This sustained exercise in the art of drawing lessons from history shows how faith looks toward God’s future and past temporary burdens.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 27. Quoted by Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message: A Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), 53.

<sup>10</sup>Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 199-200.

Bryan Chapell adds, “The stories of Christ’s life actually illustrate the nature of the heavenly Father. Jesus is the Word about God, as well as the Word from God.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Knowing the Particular Individuals or Group Being Addressed**

The narrative portions of scripture demonstrate the needs of the people as the narrative unfolds. Sometimes the demonstration of the need is individualized, sometimes it is more focused on a group. The process of this unfolding quite often yields a rich picture of God, either directly or indirectly, using circumstances to illustrate his concerns for the plight of people.

Although illustrations of concepts were often deeply meaningful to the original audience, these illustrations were never to take precedence over the truth itself. They were to have an illuminating effect upon those who heard. *Illumination* was never meant to take precedence over *revelation*. Greg Heisler writes, “Revelation alone is infallible; illumination is not . . . . Whatever the Spirit illumines in our hearts should emanate from objective revelation, not mystical visions that take us outside the revelation God has given us in his Word.”<sup>12</sup> It was not uncommon for the original audience to be intrigued by illuminating devices, but the real lasting value came with the truth itself, not the conveyance. Kuhatschek emphasizes the serious role played by the preacher in this, aided by the Holy Spirit, when he writes, “As we look for biblical principles, we are seeking to feel God’s heartbeat in the verses, paragraphs, chapters and books of Scripture.

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<sup>11</sup>Bryan Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992; reprint; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 45.

<sup>12</sup>Greg Heisler, *Spirit-Led Preaching: The Holy Spirit’s Role in Sermon Preparation and Delivery* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2007) 41.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, our goal is nothing less than to discern the mind of God.”<sup>13</sup> This is nothing new. This was every bit as relevant to the original audience as it is in a modern context.

In the modern era, the Bible is unfortunately approached much more *inductively* than *deductively*. Often, the original intent of a passage is deemed unimportant as there is a race to discover an attractive nugget of information which will bring about good feelings, encouragement, or provide a “proof text” to condemn the beliefs or actions of another.

It is generally understood by preachers and theologians that the purpose of the Bible, in addition to generally teaching, is to clarify as opposed to adding to any confusion. Some have described Bible interpretation as “peeling back layers” in order to get to the meaning. Jim Shaddix writes, “The pastor’s role is to be the paleontologist and archeologist who digs through the layers to get at the truth. He peels back the layers of language, culture, background, worldview, and more, in order to expose the truth and all its relevance for today.”<sup>14</sup> As the modern interpreter searches to understand the original context of a passage of Scripture and illustrate it for an audience, he should keep in mind that the purpose was to clarify never to confuse.

The mark of good public speaking, particularly when it comes to illustrating truth, lies in the ability of the audience to comprehend and retain material. Litfin,

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<sup>13</sup>Kuhatschek, *Applying the Bible*, 62.

<sup>14</sup>Jim Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon: Changing the Way Pastors Preach and Congregations Listen* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 127.

discussing oral communication principles writes, “The sole purpose of the speech is to clarify, explain, describe, define, report or otherwise broaden the audience’s knowledge about some concept, term, process, relationship, or other subject. The speaker’s goal is simply to enable the audience to grasp and then retain the material.”<sup>15</sup> These principles certainly are applicable to any preaching ministry. These principles have been in play since the truth of God was first being given to the people of God. Chapell writes of the challenges preachers face here, as he writes, “The preacher must travel an intellectual ‘second mile’ to create illustrations that fulfill their potential. It is not a mark of intellectual capitulation to use illustrations. It may well be a sign of intellectual sloth and communication resignation not to use them.”<sup>16</sup> The preacher who illustrates well to a modern audience, demonstrates he has intensely labored to understand the Word of God in its original context.

Some argue today that knowing the original context and original audience is, in essence, irrelevant having little or no bearing on what is taking place now. However, if meaning is to be discovered it cannot be seen apart from the true context plainly in view.

### **Know the Needs of and Connect with a Contemporary Audience**

Many sorts of clever devices and anecdotes may be employed by a preacher but these may do an injustice to the original context, contemporary audience, or individuals being addressed. The preacher may feel enormous pressure to twist, and adjust to make an illustration fit, where it simply does not fit. Often this is done to

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<sup>15</sup>Litfin, *Public Speaking*, 135.

<sup>16</sup>Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 59

“connect” with a contemporary audience at the expense of the original meaning of the text. Shaddix writes, “In our attempt to be real and relevant, we will always face the temptation to mix biblical truth with the wisdom of the world.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Life-Situation Illustrations**

Preachers should strive to connect the original meaning with a contemporary audience. The ability to connect with a contemporary audience rests largely on the preacher’s sense of human nature and what it will take to reach them who are engulfed in the throes of that nature. Chapell states, “Comprehensive communication of the Gospel must be based on a sound biblical understanding of human nature.”<sup>18</sup> The illustration is an essential connection point between biblical truth and human understanding. Without the use of illustration many would never understand a number of biblical concepts. John MacArthur writes,

We must try to get the truth to people, for it will never get in of itself; and we must remember that the hearts of our hearers are not open, like a church door, so that the truth may go in, and take its place, and sit upon its throne to be worshipped there. No, we have often to break open the doors with great effort, and to thrust the truth into places where it will not at first be a welcome guest, but where, afterwards, the better it is known, the more it will be loved. Illustrations and anecdotes will greatly help to make a way for the truth to enter; and they will do it by catching the ear of the careless and the inattentive.<sup>19</sup>

The preacher must develop a heart that has a genuine concern for the people in much the same way that Scripture teaches that the heart of God was softened by love and

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<sup>17</sup>Shaddix, *The Passion Driven Sermon*, 51.

<sup>18</sup>Chapell *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 37.

<sup>19</sup>John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching: Balancing the Science and Art of Biblical Exposition* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 247.

concern. Preaching, in the modern day, must be done within the framework of love and the way illustrations are used must also be birthed in love. Sinclair Ferguson writes, “No matter under what circumstances we preach the Word of God, no matter to whom we are speaking, insofar as we too are called to be ‘competent ministers of the new covenant,’ our preaching must always have the heart in view.”<sup>20</sup>

Ferguson goes on concerning the heart,

Preaching to the heart will not be encrusted with layers of ill-digested materials from the past, however relevant these were to their own day. Those preaching helps must rather be thoroughly digested by us, made our own, and applied to people today in today’s language. That is what it means to bring the truth to bear upon men and women, and boys and girls, in such a way that it opens up and penetrates into their hearts.<sup>21</sup>

Engaging the heart is the surest way to capture an audience. Make them see and feel the need to understand the meaning of the text in its original context and further, make personal application within their own lives.

The preacher should work incessantly to draw the congregation in with rich imagery. Chapell notes, “The message is clear: involve listeners or they will not learn.”<sup>22</sup> Henry Davis adds, “The hearers become involved in the message through the use of concrete, vivid language . . . . Since pictorial language in the nature of the case stimulates

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<sup>20</sup>Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Preaching to the Heart,” in *Feed My Sheep*, ed. Don Kistler (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 194.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>22</sup>Bryan Chapell, *Christ Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994, reprint, 2003), 173.



the senses, figures of speech also invite involvement.”<sup>23</sup> Haddon Robinson has even suggested that a preacher learn to *think* more in terms of pictures. It has also been said, “Nothing arouses audience interest or drives home the message of the sermon like a well-placed illustration to begin or to conclude the sermon. Nothing can open people up emotionally to receive difficult truth like a good illustration or story.”<sup>24</sup> Keith Willhite points out, “From a communication perspective, however, listeners determine whether the sermon is relevant. We might think that this communication perspective seems contrary to the theological perspective, but the two are quite compatible. If we did not believe that God’s Word is relevant, why would we attempt to *demonstrate* that it is?”<sup>25</sup>

Everyone has a position in life. The more an illustration can relate to an audience members’ position in life, the greater the potential for the illustration to connect in a meaningful manner. If truth is going to be relevant, it must first be meaningful. Chapell points out, “illustrations that come from dead or distant sources rarely have the timeliness, wording, or present-world details that make them naturally fresh and compelling.”<sup>26</sup> Haddon Robinson points out that “People identify with people more than ideas. They gossip about people, not principles. Good stories transcend individual

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<sup>23</sup>Henry Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958) 71, quoted by Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 186.

<sup>24</sup>Hershael W. York and Bert Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 153.

<sup>25</sup>Keith Willhite, *Preaching with Relevance: Without Dumbing Down* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 21-22.

<sup>26</sup>Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 162.

experiences so that people from a variety of situations can gain something from them. When hearing a story, listeners tell the story to themselves, inserting their own experiences and images.”<sup>27</sup> In their book, *God’s Message your Sermon*, Wayne House and Daniel Garland point out, “Illustrations have been compared to windows, which allow light to fill every room and make visible what would otherwise be unseen or shadowy.”<sup>28</sup>

Illustrations are not without weaknesses when speaking to modern audiences.

House and Garland point out,

Every analogy breaks down, and part of the skill of using illustrations is knowing their limitations and not overpressing them . . . like any good thing, they can be abused. This occurs when they dominate the truth. Windows too large, or too many, can structurally weaken a building. Likewise, illustrations that are too extensive, elaborate, entertaining, or memorable can weaken a sermon.<sup>29</sup>

Many have argued that the most meaningful and powerful illustrations come from the heart and mind of the preacher. When the preacher illustrates scriptural truth in a manner reflective of how it has impacted his own life, it is often quite powerful. It may be as simple as an experience in a restaurant from the week before, or a gripping personal account concerning his personal, ongoing battle with cancer. In addition to merely illustrating and illuminating many Scriptural texts, in a meaningful way, these serve to humanize the preacher to the audience. The audience is able to see that, first of all, he is

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<sup>27</sup>Haddon Robinson, “Considering Hearts: How Should My Approach Change Depending on Who is Listening?” in *The Art & Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 118.

<sup>28</sup>H. Wayne House and Daniel G. Garland, *God’s Message, Your Sermon: Discover, Develop, and Deliver what God Meant by What He Said* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 84.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

a man. Second, he is a man with something to say. Third, he is a man that is not particularly different from them. For instance, the farmer with only a high school education may have an inherent resistance to a man he deems to be too highly educated. In such a case, personal illustrations may help break down barriers of education and experience in ways that unadorned preaching may not accomplish immediately. Chapell writes, “Biblical truth comes alive, makes sense, and is communicated as its propositions are contextualized in the narratives that act as a transcendent ‘semiotic’ (the technical lingo for a sign system), bridging cultures and individuals by enabling others to share the experiences that signal meaning.”<sup>30</sup>

### **Personal Illustrations**

Illustrations that are the most relatable to a particular audience are generally best. Obviously an illustration which deals with rocket science is going to have the greatest impact in a room full of rocket scientists. Further, farming illustrations may be, at least partially lost, on city folks. Illustrations about the latest technology may not have as strong of impact among an audience of senior adults. Knowing the audience is a valuable aid when choosing and honing illustrations.

The preacher must learn to look at all of life for potential illustrations growing out of a desire to connect with a contemporary audience. This approach has been advocated by more than one source. Chapell writes,

The preacher who wants to use illustrations well must cultivate the ability to isolate and associate experiences. To do this the preacher must learn to see everything as a passing parade of potential illustrations – every event, face, feature, and fantasy holds illustrative promise. The preacher is much like a photographer, constantly framing one moment, one event, one sequence after another. By doing this, what

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<sup>30</sup>Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 69.

looks common to the ordinary eye becomes significant. Preachers should continually take those snapshots of life's grandeur and simplicity so as to relate both to the consistently awesome nature of God and to the too frequent tedium of their listeners' experience.<sup>31</sup>

Illustrations taken from everyday occurrences, common to the speaker and his audience, generally speak with the loudest voice to the hearer. Sinclair Ferguson writes of George Whitefield's use of illustrations which were "so vivid and real that people thought they were actually caught up in the events he was describing as to confuse what they were hearing with reality."<sup>32</sup> A personal illustration holds the potential to make the greatest impact. A good illustrator takes the audience somewhere. The preacher does not change what is there, instead he, much like a microscope, magnifies it in the minds and hearts of the people. This is most effective when it is personal.

### **Knowing How to Frame an Illustration**

Knowing how to *frame* an illustration is essential to the overall task of illustrating. An excellent working knowledge of how to set up the illustration is highly advantageous. The attention of a listener may be gained, kept, or lost in only a couple of seconds, thus it is imperative to begin well. Chapell writes,

The craft of sermon illustration begins when you as the preacher bracket an element of experience in order to give your listeners access to an associated concept, or an isolated experience may spawn the associated idea. Whatever the sequence of events, both elements operate together. If they do not, comprehension does not advance effectively.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Chapell, *Christ Centered Preaching*, 180.

<sup>32</sup>Ferguson, "Preaching to the Heart," 209.

<sup>33</sup>Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 91.

It must never be forgotten that comprehension is the desired goal. It may be tempting at times to entertain with a clever or humorous illustration, but as one given the responsibility of watch-care over souls, it is incumbent upon the preacher to be sensitive to the *true* needs, not merely the *felt* needs, of his listeners. This must continuously be considered when framing any potential illustration.

There are a number of dangers which must be avoided when framing illustrations. Referencing persons and quoting them in a manner that assumes the audience knows who those persons are can cause the preacher to come across as either arrogant or out of touch with the people. D. W. Cleverly Ford writes,

Admittedly, to quote from Dante, Dumas, Dostoyevsky, and Dickens is impressive, but . . . what a congregation will most readily hear is reference by the preacher to objects, events, and people's comments which he has seen and heard himself in the recent past in the locality. An illustration drawn from the derelict house in the next street, the aftermath of a recent storm, a local flower show, a current play at the theatre, is the kind that is most serviceable.<sup>34</sup>

The best approach is to offer a slight introduction if the preacher feels one is necessary. Often times it is nothing more than a judgment call, however if the preacher habitually judges wrongly he will lose some measure of credibility with his congregation.

Illustrations may drain from, rather than add to, the overall message if they are too long or include too many unnecessary details. Some of the details are tempting to include because they may potentially gain a laugh or even puff up the preacher. Humor certainly may be helpful at various points but should be employed only with care.

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<sup>34</sup>D. W. Cleverly Ford, *The Ministry of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 204, quoted by Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 93.

Illustrations also hold a potential for offending. If an issue is seen to be taken lightly by the preacher that a listener takes seriously, there is a potential for the illustration to not be well received, hence the whole message may not be well received.

Framing the illustration begins with careful, prayerful consideration by the pastor alone in his study. Preachers have been trained and often encouraged to seek God in prayer concerning their messages in general. If illustrations are to be a part of those messages then seeking the guidance of God concerning how best to illustrate may also be highly appropriate.

There is a real danger in getting bogged down in details. Framing the illustration well will assist in preventing this from taking place, at least not taking place with great frequency. The preacher must ask himself of every word and phrase, “What purpose does this detail serve?” In doing so he will often find that the illustration can be shortened considerably. Even a few illustrations with a few too many details, can serve to marginalize the overall impact of the message being presented. A 10 minute illustration in a 20 minute message, for instance, is likely out of balance.

Illustrations are to be servants, not masters, therefore it is incumbent upon the preacher to use them with precision, in much the same way a well sharpened knife or chisel works with greater effect than do the same instruments in a dull state. Essentially, a dull tool will do the work, but will do so in a crude and less effective manner. There is hardly a substitute for sharp, crisp, gripping illustrations. Chapell writes,

Not only do illustrations reveal deep truths in readily accessible form; they also teach people to see their lives in the light of those truths . . . illustrations are used most effectively if they describe and relate to common experience in the form of familiar emotions, identifiable dilemmas, personal traits, or situational parallels

with which listeners can immediately identify.<sup>35</sup>

When Jonathan Edwards preached his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” in 1741, it is said that people were so gripped by it that they could virtually feel the flames of hell. The desire of every preacher should be to grip his audience just as strongly by bringing truth to life through this sort of vivid imagery.

Most illustrations tend to take the form of a story. Story telling has often been viewed as an art form. Consistent with any art form, the artist holds the potential for improvement. It has been suggested that there are four key components to a good story: “there is a beginning; there must be action; a climax is reached; the conclusion ends it.”<sup>36</sup> Many illustrations lack one or more of these components, therefore reducing the impact of their potential effectiveness. The disciplined illustrator will work with diligence to frame carefully the stories he tells.

Illustrations should be appropriate. They should be appropriate specifically for the particular audience being addressed. The children’s message may require particular illustrations that the message to the pastor’s conference would not require. While the pastors present at the conference may be quite familiar with Martin Luther, the first and second graders will have no recognition. Further, the pastors may not be overly familiar with *Barney*, the purple dinosaur whereas, the children would experience immediate recognition. Framing the illustration must begin with some knowledge of the audience being addressed.

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<sup>35</sup>Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 93.

<sup>36</sup>Dawson C. Bryan, *The Art of Illustrating Sermons* (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1938) 210, quoted by Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 94.

The worst case scenario in illustrating is to detract from the message one is attempting to enhance. The preacher should come to view an illustration as a snapshot or picture which can be viewed. If that picture is not clear and recognizable then it rapidly becomes a distraction as eyes strain to see, and minds strain to understand that which is nothing more than a blur. An experienced photographer will admit that taking a good picture is not easy. There are many elements which must be kept in mind. Everything from background, lighting, colors, timing, camera settings, etc. are crucial if one desires to achieve a quality picture. While the frame may be filled in an instant, the process of framing itself takes much time and work. Chapell writes concerning this picture imagery, “if you trip the shutter clumsily or set the wrong exposure, you will blur the picture.”<sup>37</sup> Jesse Weatherspoon points out in a revision of the writing of John A. Broadus, “Whether we like it or not, most of us preach to the ‘moving picture mind.’ It is the mind accustomed to image, pictures, scenes, rapidly moving. It certainly is not accustomed to deep thinking or long, sustained argument.”<sup>38</sup> W. E. Sangster adds, “The perfect illustration does its work, and exhausts its work in so doing.”<sup>39</sup>

Many factors must be considered but perhaps none are as important as introducing an illustration correctly. Chapell writes, “The introduction sets off the experience being described from other experiences in the listeners’ minds, framing it so

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<sup>37</sup>Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 104.

<sup>38</sup>John A. Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons: Completely Revised by Jesse Burton Weatherspoon*, rev. ed. (n.p: Harper & Brothers 1926; reprint, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1944), 196.

<sup>39</sup>W.E. Sangster, *The Craft of Sermon Illustration* (London: Epworth, 1948), 91, quoted by Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 159.



that it can be viewed, appreciated, and understood.<sup>40</sup> Although the frame must ultimately be filled, without the frame itself, the illustration tends to dissipate rapidly or spill all over the place.

### **Knowing How to Fill the Frame of an Illustration**

There is often a fine line between too much and not enough of a thing. This same general truth holds when considering filling the frame in the process of illustration. Broadus cautions, “Illustrations are valuable as an ornament. To make truth attractive and pleasing is legitimate and desirable, but one must make sure that a beautiful illustration really adorns the truth that is preached and does not itself become the center of interest.”<sup>41</sup> A good illustration neither *becomes* the message nor does it *overpower* the message, instead it dresses and enhances.

The framing of an illustration is vitally important, but if the content within the frame is weak, the illustration will fail to produce the desired impact. Ideas and concepts are sterile without a context which relates to the experience of the hearer. The details of an illustration will ideally grab hold of the similar experiences of audience members. In other words, an illustration has no real life until it is given life by the hearer. It has to reach the person where they are currently. It has to evoke feelings and emotions. Vague references and ambiguous details usually fail to make any real or lasting impact and are generally forgotten as quickly as they are heard. The illustrator, in essence, facilitates the creation of reality to the audience. The way he does this is through concreteness.

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<sup>40</sup>Chapel, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 104.

<sup>41</sup>Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 197.

Chapell writes, “We simply cannot interpret what does not clearly reach us through the intermediary of experience that operates in the world of specific sensations, perceptions, and feelings. Thus, for an illustration to communicate effectively through this medium, it must contain enough concrete details of the event being described to allow vicarious experiencing (or remembering) by the listener.”<sup>42</sup> Names of people, names of places, dates, days of the week, background, moods, and overall context may add color to the illustration, but must be used cautiously. There is a fine line between encumbering the illustration with too many details and supplying enough details to make it concrete. York and Decker add, “One of the keys of power in preaching is focus. The more specific, the more intensely focused the details of a story, the more you pull the audience in, creating ‘involuntary listening’ and drawing them into the story and ultimately the application and meaning.”<sup>43</sup>

Practicing the illustration audibly and timing its recitation may be helpful in determining if it needs to be shortened. Further, in practicing the illustration audibly, the preacher may realize that he does not know the story about Aunt Gladys and her cat as well as he originally thought, thus leading him to think through the story more carefully.

Illustration is much more an art than an exact science. To become an effective illustrator takes much time and practice. Basically it requires developing a sensitivity to what is profitable and what is of nominal importance. Even after many years of practice there is still much guesswork involved. The applicable aspects of the text are somewhat tedious, albeit rich when the preacher gets it right. Kuhatschek speaks to this when he

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>43</sup>York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 165.

writes, “It would be ludicrous to assume that application can somehow become a precise science with all guesswork removed.”<sup>44</sup> Certainly the preacher must have a sense of the application of the text before he can adequately illustrate. In many regards properly selecting and honing illustrations requires a trained eye and the *ongoing* training of that eye.

Finding the content which comprises illustrations is not difficult in this modern era. There are books which provide illustrations organized by subject. Various websites such as [preachingtoday.com](http://preachingtoday.com) and others which offer more illustrations than could ever be used in a lifetime by a single preacher! Research can be done quickly on the internet by simply typing key words or phrases into a search engine such as GOOGLE. Using the internet in research certainly requires caution because not everything which can be found is from credible sources, nor is it always presented objectively, nor is it even necessarily true.

The simple practice of highlighting good illustrations during the course of reading books, journals, and magazines is a reliably fruitful practice. But if this is to work well, there must be a system in place. This writer underlines quotes and illustrations during the course of reading, then photocopies such pages and files them topically in a filing cabinet for easy retrieval later. For various occurrences during the course of life, it may serve the preacher well to write down a basic outline of events which have taken place and then file them topically along with other illustrations on the same subject. Sadly, no persons’ memory for key details is as good as would be ideal.

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<sup>44</sup>Kuhatschek, *Applying the Bible*, 11.

Generally the more personal, the more contemporary, and the more relatable an illustration the more impact it will tend to have with an audience. Filing an illustration away for too long is often a mistake. Often, the more recent the illustration the richer it's potential. If the preacher is not proactive in making notes of these various occurrences, the vast majority of those items which would have potentially served as great illustrations will be forgotten.

Illustrations collected by the preacher himself will generally be his best source of material. He will tend to not file away an illustration in the first place that is not to his liking. Books of illustrations, on the other hand, may have a great quantity of illustrations, but the majority of them will simply not resonate with the preacher and if they do not resonate with him, it will be quite difficult for it then to resonate with his audience.

Styles come and go. When a person shops for clothing, for instance, he/she expects to find garments which reflect contemporary styles not that which was in fashion thirty years ago! Illustrations likewise should reflect flow into the general stream of contemporary thought patterns. Using old or outdated illustrations serve, although unintentionally, to distract. Litfin writes, concerning connecting with an audience, "Canned supporting materials are usually dated, lacking the freshness and appropriateness for a given audience which characterize materials drawn from more creative sources."<sup>45</sup> Some great illustrations will come easily to the preacher with little or no effort, but many will require intense labor. Litfin writes, "The big-game hunter

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<sup>45</sup>Litfin, *Public Speaking*, 227.

stalking his prey, the white-coated researcher peering through a microscope, the archaeologist digging through dusty ruins, the deep-sea fisherman scanning the waves, the speaker moving through the day with a trawling eye – all have this in common: they are hunters. And to the speaker who is eager for the hunt, all of life can yield a rich catch of supporting material.”<sup>46</sup> This material is virtually everywhere but in order to be profitable to the preacher, it must be harvested. To fill the frame of an illustration requires work and training the eye to see what it may not ordinarily see.

### **Excursus: The Use of Illustrations in the Preaching of Donald Grey Barnhouse**

Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895-1960) served as the pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for thirty-three years and was the voice of *The Bible Study Hour*. Not only was he a thorough expositor of the Scriptures but was viewed by many as a master illustrator. His philosophy was that all of God’s creation, in essence, was an illustration of God and his truth. In even the most seemingly mundane or unimportant instances of life, Barnhouse seemed to find ways to enhance and illustrate the revealed truth of God. He wrote,

Since God planned me before He planned trees and lakes and mountains, and storms and sunsets, I said, ‘everything that there is, was created in order to illustrate spiritual truth. Everything. I don’t care what it is – the way the echo sounds if you clap your hands, the way light gleams off metal, the way paper tears, you name it – you can find a sermon illustration in it. A sermon illustration is in the things right around you.’<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 226-27.

<sup>47</sup>Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Let Me Illustrate: More than 400 Stories, Anecdotes & Illustrations* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1967), 9.

Russell T. Hitt writes of Barnhouse in the introduction to *Bible Truth Illustrated*, a collection of his illustrations, “Donald Grey Barnhouse used illustrations in a popular expository ministry that was perhaps unparalleled in his generation. No one who heard Dr. Barnhouse explain the Scriptures could ever forget the striking illustrations he employed to make spiritual truth come alive. Many testify that years after the fact, they recall sermons delivered by this great teacher of the Word of God.”<sup>48</sup> Hitt goes on to say, “Not only did he always have something fresh and relevant to say, but he was always able to illustrate divine truth in a colorful manner.”<sup>49</sup>

Barnhouse made the most of the simple concept of making much out of little. The essence of Barnhouse’s philosophy is captured well by Bryan Chapell when he describes turning the ordinary into the sublime.

The preacher who wants to create illustrations must cultivate the ability to isolate and associate experiences. To do this, the common way of looking at the world, namely, as a passing parade of little consequence unless some clown comes by and tweaks your nose, must cease. Every passing form, color, and shadow holds illustrative promise. The preacher must look at the world marching past the eyes as a photographer looks through a camera, constantly framing one moment, one event, one sequence after another. What looks common to the ordinary eye is significant to the artist because of the peculiar shadow upon it, the colors in the background, or a tear upon a face that should be smiling. Preachers should be continually taking snapshots of both life’s great and commonplace events so that they may relate both to the awe and to the tedium their listeners’ experience. Nothing of life goes by without examination. If you hope to illustrate well, do not wait passively for the world to offer you something significant to note. Rather, the opportunity to display. There is beauty in a child’s mud puddle, irony in a monument to a saint, pageantry in an abandoned city lot, and grief in a sagging barn, if the preacher will but see it. The psalmist thought that the stars ‘poured

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<sup>48</sup>Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Bible Truth Illustrated*, paperback ed. (Grand Rapids: Revell,, 1996), n.p.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

forth speech' about God (Ps 19:2), and Agur saw God's providence in the home of a rock badger (Prov 30:26). You too can see as much and show as much, if you are committed to relating experiential truths that people can feel and comprehend. This does not mean that you can, or should look at every object or event asking, 'Now, what does this illustrate?' Such concentration would rob you of movement through life and your enjoyment of it. Still, if you are a preacher, you can open your mind and vision to receive a spectrum of light and life that others do not usually see. You see in the ordinary that which discloses the sublime. Yours is a trained eye. Others see what you see; they do not see as you see.<sup>50</sup>

The created world was something of a living illustration to Barnhouse. The Scriptures were brought to life as one merely took notice of that which God had created. He further recognized the inexhaustible depth of God's creation. Hitt writes,

But this great expositor never rested on the oars of his divinely endowed gift. Insatiably curious, he constantly sought new illustrations. He devoured the *New York Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *Time* magazine, French newspapers and periodicals. He read in his study, in his bed and as he traveled, crisscrossing the country, to conduct Bible conferences. The trunk of his car was always filled with books on a variety of subjects.<sup>51</sup>

He recognized that in order to be a good illustrator he also had to know people very well.

Hitt writes,

Living abroad for many years and probing into various cultures gave Dr. Barnhouse an awareness of the common characteristics of human beings everywhere. Like his Lord, he knew men – their foibles and their strengths. His illustrations were drawn from nature, from social, political and domestic life – current stories and contemporary events. No aspect of life was off limits.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 92.

<sup>51</sup>Barnhouse, *Bible Truth Illustrated*, n.p.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

Illustrating, and the preparation to do so, became something of a lifestyle to Barnhouse. He is even said to have issued challenges to his kids concerning his ability to make illustrations out of what seemed to be nothing. “He even played games with his children who challenged him to find illustrations for his sermons as they drove along in their car.”<sup>53</sup> Barnhouse, was consistent with the concept taught by John A. Broadus several decades earlier. Broadus identified *observation* as being one of his key sources for illustration. He wrote, “It is pre-eminently important that the teacher of religion should be a close observer, partly that he may know how to adapt religious instruction to the real character of his hearers, and the actual conditions of their life, but also that he may be able to draw from that inexhaustible store of illustration which lies everywhere open to the man who has eyes to see and ears to hear.”<sup>54</sup>

Barnhouse saw more of an intertwining of the world (the created) with God (the creator) than perhaps most would see. Simple observation of the world around him could quickly lead to a worshipful experience, not to mention a treasure trove of ideas for illustration in preaching.

### **Excursus: The Use of Illustrations in the Preaching of Charles Swindoll**

Charles R. Swindoll, (1934 - ) is one of the best known preachers of the modern era. He is still widely heard on his daily *Insight for Living* radio broadcast. Swindoll’s fame and longevity of influence has come largely from his ability to captivate

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, 199-200.



an audience with powerful exposition, reinforced by solid application and illustration of the principles revealed in Scripture.

Swindoll states his rationale for the importance of illustrating the text in an introduction to a book collecting many of his illustrations used over time.

Through all the years and in all the places I have been engaged in this calling, I have learned the value of good illustrations. Interesting illustrations. Illustrations that grab the attention and clear the minds of those listening. Illustrations that open the windows, bringing light to truth. Under the general heading of illustrations, I would include stories, anecdotes, quotations, analogies, incidents, experiences, poems, songs, delightful moments, struggles I've endured, as well as humorous situations I've been in that, when later told, help make the truth come alive. More times than I can count, I remember using such illustrations and watching God pry open the eyes and unstop the ears (not to mention soften the hearts) of others, many of whom were bound and determined not to give me even the time of day . . . until they were stabbed awake and compelled to listen. Those experiences have always thrilled me and sometimes amazed me. A well-chosen illustration can transform a hostile skeptic into an interested participant. I know; I've seen it happen.<sup>55</sup>

Swindoll's authoritative, yet soothing voice, along with the rich exposition and illustration of biblical truth have made him a well-trusted preacher to countless many.

Preaching should be rich as well as powerful. It should never be a step down nor a step back but instead a step up and a step forward. Sermons should, at a minimum, be among the most exciting events in the lives of people.

Swindoll has rarely awed audiences with his utter brilliance or entertained them with brash showmanship. He has simply helped the Word of God come alive to those who have heard him preach. He can take a person from where he/she is to where he wishes for them to go if that person listens carefully and is willing to follow. But the

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<sup>55</sup>Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations & Quotes: Over 1,500 Outstanding Ways to Effectively Drive Home Your Message* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), xv-xvi.

place he takes the person is not far away, in fact the person stays very close to where he/she is – in the realm of reality the person already knows. What he says is true and the person knows it to be true. Chapell writes, “The old preacher’s adage still applies: ‘The cure for boredom is not brilliance; it is realism.’ Realism is hardly accessible if today’s realities disappear from view whenever the pastor illustrates.”<sup>56</sup> The reality of today is truly the only reality anyone actually knows. Swindoll has often been known for his ability to bridge the twin realities of the Word and the world.

Swindoll’s goal is to make complex truth simpler to understand. He says, “Truth made clear through the use of just the right illustration, anecdote, story, or quotation is applied more quickly and remembered much longer. I am rarely asked, ‘How did you come up with that outline?’ or ‘When did those insights from that Scripture dawn on you?’ But I have often heard, ‘Where did you get that illustration?’”<sup>57</sup> York and Decker add, “Whether we like it or not, people remember our illustrations far better than they remember the main points of the sermon. No matter how much time we might spend coming up with an outline that accurately and artistically portrays the text, they will not be nearly so taken by the logic of our outline as by the emotion of our stories.”<sup>58</sup>

Swindoll believes illustrations have a lasting value which attach themselves to biblical truth causing that biblical truth to be remembered along with the illustration. He writes,

You can appreciate my delight when I first found Solomon’s remarks about this. ‘In addition to being a wise man, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge,

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<sup>56</sup>Chapell, *Using Illustrations to Preach with Power*, 163.

<sup>57</sup>Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, xvi.

<sup>58</sup>York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 150.

and he pondered, searched out and arranged many proverbs. . . . [he] sought to find delightful words and to write words of truth correctly. The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of these collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd” (Eccl 12:9-11 NASB).<sup>59</sup>

Preachers who seek to be faithful in their deployment into the pulpit ministry must seek better and more effective ways to communicate biblical truth. This truth serves as the axiom of all Christianity is about. Far more than a casual pursuit should be made at the point of seeking how to plant, water, and cultivate the seedlings of truth scattered upon the human heart. Proper, and perhaps creative, use of illustrations serve that purpose to a vast degree. Swindoll writes, “Who can measure the persuasive goading of ‘delightful words’ that have been pondered and searched out?’ Who better than the preacher has experienced the compelling impact of stories or examples that penetrate the surface of the soul and then hammer the truth home like ‘well-driven nails?’”<sup>60</sup>

Revealing his simple methodology for collecting illustrations, Swindoll writes, “Knowing the effectiveness and long-lasting benefits of illustrations, I have been doing what most preachers do: gathering them from every source imaginable, then using them for introductions, for clarification, for conclusions. My collection fills several file drawers, and the stack increases each year.”<sup>61</sup> In much the same manner as Barnhouse and others, Swindoll’s approach to collecting illustrations comes from a watchful eye and

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<sup>59</sup>Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, xvi.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

a willingness to work with diligence to help prepare himself to render material which will potentially help bring to life all-important biblical truth.

### **Excursus: An Evaluation of Methods Used by Barnhouse and Swindoll**

Both Swindoll and Barnhouse serve as models for preachers everywhere who wish to better communicate with their congregations. Their methodology, as well as their ability has been copied by countless others with the same goal in mind. From both men the importance of watching carefully for illustration material is/was a daily reality. For them a preacher can learn the importance of training himself to look at all things with much more care and prudence.

Great communicators are great at communicating because they make a connection. Few would argue that either Barnhouse or Swindoll were more intelligent than others. Although their intelligence is clear, it is much more about the efforts they expended to accomplish a goal. Their goal was for people to understand and retain biblical knowledge. *Entertaining* with flowery illustrations was hardly on their minds. These men were acutely aware that provoking the emotions was a great aid to retention. And that is what they sought to accomplish.

Swindoll's illustrations can be a bit overpowering in some cases. In the opinion of this writer, there are times when the illustration goes beyond its purpose of bringing clarity and actually overpowers the message, not regularly but certainly on occasion, as is also true with any preacher. One of Swindoll's greatest strengths is that his illustrations connect with people right where they are at the moment. They tend to be fresh, appropriate, and resonate with the common man. His delivery also significantly adds to the appeal.

Barnhouse is a generation removed from Swindoll, but the principles employed by both men are quite similar. The illustrations of Barnhouse are much more dated than are those of Swindoll, largely because of the time differential in which they lived and preached. Barnhouse came across as more intellectual and educated than Swindoll, which was a weakness of his ability to connect with the audience at times, however his approach was not particularly out of touch for its time. In fact, in his day he was clearly viewed as a master at his craft.

Whether Swindoll, Barnhouse, or other preachers of the more modern era, there are more similarities than differences when it comes to the way illustrations are found, the philosophy behind them, and the way they are delivered. These men draw attention to the importance of taking illustrations and making them fit with one's own personality. If someone tries to be something they are not, they will likely be exposed when they try to illustrate. Both Swindoll and Barnhouse have found a great niche in simply being themselves and letting their personalities show through in their practice of illustrating.

### **Conclusion**

There is a balance which must be struck between the world of Scripture and contemporary world in which people live. Herschel York and Scott A. Blue write, "Expository preaching must have footing in both the biblical text and the present-day audience. This is not due to any insufficiency in the text or lack of perspicuity."<sup>62</sup> It is simply due to reality. "By illustrating the sermon, we are able to shed light on the text

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<sup>62</sup>Hershael York and Scott A. Blue, "Is Application Necessary in the Expository Sermon?" *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 3 no. 2 (Summer 1999): 74.

and make its meaning plain, establish an emotional connection with our hearers, and provide a hook by which they can remember and apply the exhortations of the sermon.”<sup>63</sup>

While it is true human beings can learn and retain material truth taught from God’s Word, it is also true that the use of illustrations greatly facilitates that process. Art Azurdia fittingly writes,

To be sure, an unaided person can absorb the Scriptures through his eyes and ears. On a purely intellectual level he may possess the mental faculties necessary to assimilate some of the concepts being communicated. He may even possess the skill to regurgitate it in some kind of responsive fashion. But to acknowledge that truth in his heart and conform to it in his will is altogether beyond his fallen capacities. He has been informed, but not illuminated. He has read words from a book called the Bible, but he has not heard the voice of God.<sup>64</sup>

Indeed, hearing the voice of God is the longing of any preacher and his personal joy is magnified exponentially when that same joy is reproduced in the lives of his congregation.

Mankind wanders in darkness until illumined by the light of the knowledge God imparts. Preachers of the Word have received the indescribable privilege of sharing in the process of illumination, ultimately brought about by God himself. God chose to work through man. He further chose to call preachers and work through them to proclaim his holy Word. Among the greatest tools at the disposal of the preacher to aid in this process of proclamation is the device known as illustration.

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<sup>63</sup>York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 150.

<sup>64</sup>Arturo G. Azurdia, *Spirit Empowered Preaching: Involving The Holy Spirit in Your Ministry* (Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1998), 42.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS OF A 15-WEEK PROJECT

Over the course of a 15- week period, I conducted a project to assist me in gaining a better understanding of how to improve the use of illustrations in expository preaching in my church setting. I was able to receive some helpful insight by means of this process which will potentially yield long-term benefits for my preaching ministry.

#### **Pre-Project Congregational Survey**

I began this process by distributing a 20-question survey to the congregation (Appendix 1). During the morning announcement time, I explained to the congregation the purpose of the survey and how it would help me in the completion of this project. Instructions were given as to the importance of the survey for my research, the need for honesty in their responses, the location which to place completed survey forms, and the instruction for anyone with questions to please see me after the service. Completed survey forms were to be placed in a clearly marked box on the table in the church foyer. The church's Sunday morning attendance averages only about 65 people with several of that number consisting of children and visitors. Altogether, only 23 completed surveys were returned.

The results of the survey yielded no great surprises. I would attribute this in part to the fact that during my nearly 7 years as pastor of the church I have defined and emphasized expository preaching extensively. The questions which pertained to

expository preaching revealed the survey respondents possessed a reasonable understanding of expository preaching. It also revealed they were concerned with preaching matching authorial intent as opposed to preaching which simply evoked emotions. It also revealed an unmistakable link between sermon illustrations, learning, and retention of biblical truths. The majority opinion was that illustrations were a positive contributor to persons' overall process of learning and ability to recall. In fact, questions which pertained to how people receive and retain knowledge revealed that a strong majority appreciated the use of illustrations to clarify points and assist in their understanding of the material being presented.

### **The Assemblage of a Focus Group**

Two weeks prior to the beginning of my sermon series on Hebrews 11, I sent out letters to those I wished to be participants in my 7-person focus group. Those chosen included 4 alternates, as I anticipated the likely event that one or more of the other participants would be absent on a Sunday at some point in the process. The participants were asked to let me know as soon as possible of their willingness to be a part of the focus group. All 7 agreed to participate along with 3 out of the 4 alternates. All participants, including the alternates, were asked to be at the first meeting in order to hear the instructions concerning what would take place and what was expected of them as participants. At the informational meeting, many expressed thankfulness that they had been included in what they believed to be helpful to their pastor. Further, I had the opportunity to answer several of their questions.

The participants were chosen on the basis of their faithfulness in attendance, commitment to the church, and overall support of my ministry. I had the benefit of



knowing the majority of these people for nearly 7 years, so I had a good sense of who would make desirable participants. Further, these persons were selected with their general age bracket in mind as I sought to achieve a broader cross-section of individuals. 2 persons were over 60 years of age, 2 persons were under 30 years of age, and 3 persons were between the ages of 30 and 60.

### **Sermon Series on Hebrews 11 and Focus Group Feed-Back**

Over the course of a 6-week period, I preached a series of expository messages from Hebrews 11—often referred to as the great “Faith” chapter of the Bible (Appendix 2). In addition to exposition, I placed a great deal of emphasis on illustrating important points in the sermon well. On average, I spent an extra 2 or more hours in sermon preparation for these 6 messages, simply in the process of searching out, selecting, and honing illustrations. I found considerably more material than I was able to use. My greatest problem proved to be narrowing down to the most appropriate illustrations for the particular points at hand. Another problem arose as many illustrations on this subject are tied specifically to faith in Christ at the point of salvation. For my purposes in this series, I needed to illustrate faith in a more general sense.

The focus group was asked to complete a 4-question analysis sheet concerning the message they had just heard preached (Appendix 3). Particular focus was asked to be given to my use of illustrations in the sermon. Each week I led the focus group to discuss the sermon illustrations used, one by one, and asked them to share how they felt these did or did not fit with the overall theme of the message and how they did or did not illustrate the immediate point being considered.

## Week 1

On the first Sunday of the sermon series I preached from Hebrews 11:1-7 on faith leading to understanding. I met with the focus group for approximately 45 minutes afterwards.

Throughout the entirety of the 6-week series, the focus group was asked to answer the same 4 questions concerning the sermon they had just heard. When asked the question, “I understand the meaning of today’s sermon,” all participants indicated they either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed. When asked their opinion concerning the statement, “I believe the sermon was expository,” all either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed.

When asked their thoughts concerning the statement, “I understand this passage more thoroughly than I did before today’s sermon, the first week, 3 strongly agreed, 2 somewhat agreed, and 1 was undecided. When asked about agreement with the statement, “I believe I will remember a particular personal story used in today’s sermon for a long time to come,” 2 indicated they strongly agreed, 4 indicated somewhat agreement and 1 was undecided. The final component of question 4 was to respond to the following statement: “If you agreed with this statement, please identify the particular personal story in a few words.” One respondent left the question blank. One cited a visual illustration used which entailed my holding up a 5-dollar bill in one hand and 1000 dollars’ worth of *Monopoly* money in the other. Five of the 7 respondents cited a personal story which I referred to as “an account of two Jerry’s” taken from an experience in my own pastoral ministry approximately 12 years earlier. Discussion indicated that illustration was powerful to the group, but most agreed that the use of too

many names made it more difficult to follow. The group indicated that the illustration could have been shortened and the specific names used been kept to a minimum and still would have produced the same effect.

The group responded positively to the illustrations used in the message. Two illustrations early in the message were based on a big news story from only 3 days prior to the delivery of the sermon. Several comments affirmed how illustrations which are timely often speak the most vividly. Each participant indicated their feeling that there were not *too* many details given nor was the illustration difficult to follow. One woman indicated that the illustration had been informative to her in an unexpected way. She indicated the illustration factually answered a question of which she had often been curious.

The group reported that the other illustrations used in the message complimented the points well but did not have the impact of the 2 best illustrations (the account of the two Jerry's and the Monopoly money versus real money illustrations). One illustration drew from the distant past – an illustration concerning the faith of those who sailed to the new world on the *Mayflower*; however the group felt it was still highly appropriate.

Generally, I preach 30 to 40 minutes; however with the addition of these illustrations and because these verses were rich in content, the length of my sermon was 55 minutes! Illustrations will add to the length of the message and that must be considered when choosing them and when determining which details to include and which not to include. Some of the overall impact of the message was, perhaps lost, simply because of the increased length and as attention spans exceeded their limits.

I was forced to consider time management in a manner I had not previously. I had to consider covering shorter segments of Scripture per message, reducing the amount of technical information shared with the congregation during sermon delivery, and determining a reasonable percentage of the sermon to devote to illustrating. My conclusion was that all are appropriate at times. Congregations are well served when preachers choose shorter passages and explain and illustrate them well. However, in many cases “overview” sermons are appropriate, yet still need to be well illustrated.

A preacher should likely develop a rough percentage in his mind as to how much of the sermon’s overall content will be consumed with illustrating. Following a simple guideline could potentially help him stay more balanced. My thoughts are that no more than 25 percent of the length of the delivered sermon should be used on illustration; however others may opt for more and for less. The overarching point is that being conscience of the need to regulate is important and will help maintain balance in the preparation and delivery of sermons.

Editing a sermon is not unlike editing material for print. Each word should, theoretically be relevant or cut out of the final product. Some sermons are too technical and congregations would be better served by relevant illustrations instead. It is a sermon by sermon judgment call that a preacher has to make each time he prepares to speak on behalf of God. Striking the proper balance is achieved most fully when a preacher makes peace with his own conscience on this issue.

## **Week 2**

On week 2 I preached from Hebrews 11:8-12 concerning faith in the lives of Abraham and Sarah. I continued to illustrate the theme of faith by asking the congregation to consider the fact that no one present had ever seen an atom; further no one present had ever seen a dinosaur, yet believed in these things although never having seen them with their eyes. The focus group relayed to me afterwards that this comparison brought to life for them the whole concept of faith and characterized what it was truly all about.

I further illustrated faith by identifying times in the natural course of our lives when we *demonstrate* faith. Such times include eating in a restaurant, flying in an airplane, driving in a car, depositing money in the bank, etc. I shared an illustration of how my grandfather had interest drawn on his savings account mailed to him in the form of a check, then went into the bank and deposited the interest! It brought him some level of comfort to actually see the check rather than relying solely on a bank statement.

The above illustrations served well to compliment the faith that Abraham and Sarah demonstrated as they waited on God to provide the son of promise. The focus group strongly indicated the illustrations had greatly enhanced the message by bringing biblical concepts into the context of their personal lives.

## **Week 3**

On week 3 I preached from Hebrews 11:13-16 concerning the heritage of faith. I used as an opening illustration, my grandparents who went to church all their lives and believed that Christ could return at any moment, yet died without seeing that promised

return. I emphasized how their faith was not in vain, no more than was all those who died not actually seeing the fulfillment of the promises of God.

The most notable illustration from the message, based on the feedback of the focus group, was that of Geraldo Rivera presiding over the opening of gangster Al Capone's vault in 1986. It was an event which garnered record-breaking television viewership and much hype, but in the end turned out to be a major disappointment when the vault was found to only contain dirt and empty bottles. I contrasted this with a cross-reference from Romans 5:5 which celebrates the hope which is found in God which does not disappoint. Most of the members of the focus group recalled watching the Geraldo Rivera special live as it aired, though some had forgotten. The younger members did not see it, nor had they ever heard of it before. They even thought the whole scenario to be humorous.

I also used an illustration which centered around Cassie Bernall, who was killed in the massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999. From my vantage point, few supporting details were needed because this happened, in my thinking, quite recently. Further, it happened only a few miles from where I preach each Sunday. I came to realize however that the younger members of the focus group had no actual memory of the shooting, which had occurred more than a decade earlier. They were only about 5 to 7 years old at the time. Their feedback was something of a wake-up call to me because, I took for granted that everyone knew all about this major news event. I failed to take into account that anyone younger than early twenties likely does not remember the details of what took place.

Throughout this process, I tended to learn more from the younger members of the focus group. Myself and everyone else in the group, tended to see things similarly, but regularly throughout the process, I found the younger people seeing the world in a very different manner and further hearing my illustrations differently.

#### **Week 4**

On week 4 of the series I preached from Hebrews 11:17-22 on faith in the lives of The Patriarchs. I spent quite a bit of time contrasting a “true” faith as compared with a “false” faith, which is really no faith at all. I used as one of my key illustrations, the PBS series *Antiques Roadshow*. I cited how often persons bring in items for appraisal and are pleasantly surprised the item is worth much more than they had dreamed. However, there are also occasions when someone brings in an item expecting it to be valuable, but finds out it is instead an imitation or fake. I compared these items to the “faith” of many people. A faith that cannot be “tested” cannot be “trusted.”

I illustrated the concept of faith further by discussing the biblical concept of tithing and how giving a tithe is effectually an act of faith. Through this act, people allow themselves to experience the blessing of God. The Hebrew Patriarchs certainly went through much testing as God tempered them for his work. They had to prove themselves faithful stewards through this long and difficult process.

This message was largely illustrated by telling the background stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. It was my belief that I spent adequate time giving these sorts of details, but the consensus of the focus group was that they would have appreciated more detail given.

I was reminded once again that, many of my audience did not have a strong background in the Bible. Many came to faith in Christ as adults and some, not so long ago, and therefore may not know much about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. I was challenged in a fresh way to be conscious of my audience and not take for granted they know the background stories of many of the great characters and events of the Bible.

## **Week 5**

On week 5 of the series, I preached from Hebrews 11:23-29 on faith in the life of Moses. The illustrations attempted to lead the congregation to empathize with the emotions involved in this narrative account. In particular, the emotions felt by the mother of Moses when she gave up her son, and those felt by Moses himself when he forsook luxury in favor of identification with his own people. I sought to help the people see the level of faith possessed by these persons as demonstrated by their actions. So much of the difficulty and pain at any given moment is only temporary and is working in a far greater manner for eternal glory. My attempt was to help bridge the gap between a distant character, such as Moses, and the real life struggles, pain, and pain and difficult choices people often feel and experience.

The focus group indicated the illustrations used were appropriate and supported the overall theme of the sermon, but also indicated they were not illustrations which they were likely to remember for any length of time. They essentially served their purpose, but were not overly memorable.

I was reminded once again how much the Hollywood production *The Ten Commandments* affects peoples' perceptions of the events recorded in Exodus. The younger members of the focus group especially kept wanting to bring the discussion back



to portrayals made in the movie. Again, I had to come face to face with the reality that media shapes perception of reality in a way, and to a degree, for which I was not adequately prepared.

## **Week 6**

On this final week of the sermon series I preached from Hebrews 11:30-40 on faith overcoming to victory. I drew attention to the fact that most successful and famous people have had to overcome great obstacles and struggles in order to reach the place they now occupy. I shared about enjoying autobiographies and reading how, step by step, various people overcame great odds in order to achieve ultimate success.

I touched on several different biblical events and characters in this message including how God gave success at Jericho, how God worked through Rahab the harlot, Samuel, David, Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, Barak, Elijah, and Elisha, who are alluded to in this passage. I spent a few minutes summarizing the victory at Jericho and summarized the contribution of Rahab, but spent very little time on the other characters, instead offering only a couple of sentences of summary.

The focus group gave more negative feedback for this message than any in the series. Their basic complaint was that I should have spent more time summarizing the contributions of the persons that they said I had only mentioned briefly. One man even mentioned that he had felt “short-changed” by my devoting so little time to summarizing these contributions.

The group indicated they did not have a better understanding of the passage than before I preached my message. The feedback from this message was considerably different than from the other messages preached for this series. However, as I reflected, I

realized their criticism was largely justified. In earnestly trying to understand this passage, one must see faith alive and at work in the lives of these people named. Merely mentioning that they had faith was not enough. The people potentially could have been better served had this sermon been divided into perhaps a part 1 and part 2 with more detail given. In so doing, I would have risked being repetitious with the theme.

### **Teaching Lay Preachers and Teachers Principles of Illustrating**

Many lay preachers and Sunday School teachers can and should benefit from many of the principles learned in my research. Illustrating well enhances our communication with one another in virtually every context. Christians need to be more effective in sharing their faith and certainly being better at illustrating is a positive step in that direction.

I sent initial letters to the teachers and lay preachers in the church asking them to identify a preferable time for me to meet with them for training in the principles of illustrating, based on my doctoral project. After receiving feedback from several, I settled on a schedule which worked for nearly everyone asked to attend. There were ultimately 12 persons who attended these training sessions.

I made copies of chapters 2 and 3 of my project ahead of time, and asked each participant to read the 2 chapters in preparation. The purpose was to try and achieve better discussion.

#### **Session 1**

The first session covered expository preaching and teaching. I drew a distinction between an “expository” style and the more common “topical” style. I gave

the group the challenge to teach in as much of an expository manner as possible, even when teaching from quarterlies or other pre-made material. I gave them specific suggestions as to how this could be accomplished, such as carefully reading the background material and understanding each lesson within its proper context. I also challenged them to do word studies of key words which appeared in the lesson, even though this might be more tedious than other aspects of preparing their lessons it was nevertheless advantageous. I also encouraged them not to wait until Saturday Night to begin preparation. I stressed that often in doing so, they would not really be able to do justice to the text of Scripture. I also shared some benefits of teaching and preaching in this manner over time, mainly that both they and their students would develop a much greater depth of knowledge in the Scriptures.

## **Session 2**

In the second session I led the group through a study on the scriptural basis for using illustrations in expository preaching and teaching. This session was tied heavily to my research for chapter 2 of this project. I gave them an overview of each of the 6 passages I explored in my research and then asked them if they could think of other passages which were appropriate. There were a few other Scriptures mentioned which did, in varying ways, show consistency with what we had already discussed. The overall consensus of the group was surprise that the concept of illustrating was such a biblically grounded principle.

Also in this session, we discussed the parables of Jesus briefly and why they, on one hand, showed the importance of learning through stories, while on the other hand, were also inspired Scripture and could not be quantified with an illustration used in a

modern sermon or lesson. This proved to be a great time of learning for the group and they were able to draw a clear distinction between parables and the typical illustration heard in a sermon.

This session had the potential to go on much longer than it actually did, due largely to much enthusiasm for discussion. The group seemed to be most enamored with the biblical teaching concerning communicating Scriptural truth in a manner which can be understood by common man.

### **Sessions 3 and 4**

In the third and fourth sessions I led the group through an overview of what various preachers and authors have said and written about illustrating. The content of these sessions was based heavily on chapter 3 of my project. There was notable surprise on their part that so much had been written about this subject. They also expressed they were challenged in a fresh way to use illustrations more as a part of their teaching ministries. Several indicated they now felt a sense of responsibility to take extra steps in the preparatory process each week.

The group also indicated they found helpful my suggestions on where to go to find illustrations. I gave them suggestions as to how to use the internet more effectively in the process of preparation. I also carried in a box full of books from my office which were full of topically arranged illustrations. While many of these books would not be overly practical for laymen, some of them could prove quite helpful. I further challenged them to be more observant and look harder for illustrations of biblical truth in everyday life just as Donald Grey Barnhouse stressed and modeled so well.

## **Session 5**

In the fifth and final session, I summarized and reviewed items covered in the previous sessions. I asked for feedback and called for discussion. During this time there was a mixture of questions, comments and observations about what we had covered. Overall, this final session seemed redundant; however, it also seemed to serve the purpose of solidifying the material in the minds of the people.

### **Post-Project Congregational Survey**

During the final 2 weeks of the project I distributed, collected, and analyzed the post-project survey distributed to the entire congregation (Appendix 1). The survey itself, the process of distribution, instruction, and analysis, was exactly the same as the pre-project survey.

I found almost no difference in the pre-project verses the post-project surveys. There was a slightly better understanding of expository preaching, but it was very little. There was slightly more emphasis placed on the premise that illustrations aid in learning and retaining material. In informal conversations with some members of the congregation, I received several comments indicating people could tell more effort had been placed by me in the illustrations used in my sermons. These positive comments served to reinforce the whole premise of my project and also served as a personal encouragement.

### **Conclusion**

This project yielded only a few surprising results. It also confirmed that which I already believed about expository preaching, illustrating, etc. One interesting thing about the project was that in its requirement to involve people, to a great degree, I was

repeatedly reminded that the need for illustration itself is because of the unmistakable reality of the need to communicate the Word of God to people. If there were no people, there would be no need for illustration. It was good at this point in the process to become grounded once again. These are not ivory tower concepts reserved for discussion among the elite, but this is about the process of relaying God's holy word to his people so they are able, in turn, to understand and make application to their personal lives. Through the process of this project, I was reminded of the stewardship given to me as a preacher of the Word of God.

## CHAPTER 5

### A FINAL EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

#### **Introduction**

Illustration is an increasingly important part of teaching and preaching in a society that learns through visual means. Although the basic need for illustration as a part of teaching and preaching is nothing new, the need is arguably greater than it has ever been. Additionally, the treasure trove of illustrations from which to draw is also larger than it has ever been in this information overloaded culture.

This project afforded me the opportunity to strengthen an area of my preaching ministry which I likely would not have addressed otherwise – namely improving the use of illustrations in my ministry. Every preacher learns the skills over time necessary to preach more effectively. Generally these skills develop slowly over a lifetime of ministry. In my case, however, this project helped speed up the learning process in one concentrated area – improving the use of illustrations. I am grateful to have experienced this learning opportunity.

#### **Evaluation of the Project's Purpose**

My stated purpose for this project was “to improve the use of illustrations in expository preaching, whereby strengthening the congregations understanding of sermonic points at First Baptist Church of Broomfield, Colorado.” There were 2

particular aspects to the overall purpose. One purpose was to improve my overall ability as an illustrator in my preaching and teaching ministry. The other purpose was to help the congregation better understand my sermon points.

I personally sought to become better at the selection, honing, and delivery of illustrations to achieve the maximum impact on the hearer. Further, I purposed for hearers to improve upon their own ability to understand. I desired to see my illustrations help the congregation engage the text more fully and thereby come to a better understanding. Just as I grew in my understanding of my purpose as a preacher, I wanted the congregation to grow in their understanding of their role as listeners. I desired for them to move from primarily passive listening to more active listening. I wanted them to begin to understand how we must work diligently toward a process of becoming better listeners.

In evaluating this project, I am reasonably satisfied with my efforts to help the project achieve its stated purpose. I do not believe the project's purpose was too broad nor too narrow. Although not perfect, I believe it did serve its purpose well.

### **Evaluation of the Project's Goals**

My 4 stated goals for this project were to “lead the membership of First Baptist Church to recognize expository preaching, to discover how to better use illustrations in expository preaching, to enlist a group of church members in order to evaluate use of illustrations, and teach selected church leaders how to use illustrations in their teaching and/or preaching.”

The goals for this project were multifaceted. I was not to be the lone beneficiary of my research and other efforts. This project was closely tied to the



congregation seeking not only to teach them, but, in effect, to teach them to teach others more productively.

Much preaching these days is not of an expository nature, therefore I found it very important to continue instilling into my congregation the importance of developing a love for an expository style of preaching. In my years of service at the church, I have often taught, written and tried to model this type of preaching. It is difficult to measure fully how much this project alone contributed to their understanding concerning expository preaching, and how much came from my previous efforts.

My second stated goal was to discover how to better use illustrations in expository preaching. My initial thoughts and interest in the project topic centered around this second goal. At first I saw my project topic as one-dimensional. I saw it mostly as an exercise in improving my ability to communicate. With this thought in mind, I sought to discover better and more effective ways by which to convey the truths of God in a modern context. This goal was my first and only goal until more information concerning the assignment forced me to look at the potential project topic more broadly.

My third stated goal was to enlist the assistance of a focus group in order to help me better evaluate my illustrations during sermons. This goal was more worthwhile than I realized at the time. Throughout this process, I was reminded of the importance of the congregation my reason for preaching in the first place. It has been easy at times to focus on the academic aspects of this project and forget that people should be front and center. My work with the focus group helped me better understand *how* people were actually hearing what I was saying. So often there is an unmistakable disconnect between that which is actually being heard and that which the preacher *thinks* is being

heard. The enlistment of a focus group and the subsequent work with it proved to make this third stated goal, one of the very most important. There were some surprising insights shared, many of which were helpful.

My fourth goal was to teach a selected group of teachers and lay-preachers some of the principles learned throughout the course of my project. This goal developed out of a realization that the principles I discovered by me would also benefit others, particularly Sunday School teachers and others in various teaching capacities. This was a surprising goal in the beginning. This goal was not anything I had thought about prior to the actual development of the project goals as required. But, I now see that it was a natural outgrowth of the project's overall purpose and goals. Additionally it was practical and helpful to those who went through the training sessions.

The goals for this project proved themselves worthwhile throughout the duration of the project itself. There was never a point where one or more of the goals seemed out of touch with the overall tenor of the project. Working toward each goal broadened my perspective along the way.

### **Strengths of the Project**

This project was strong in a number of regards. It grew out of a genuine motive on my part to improve a skill which I hoped would serve me well in years to come in my practice of preaching. There was no desire on my part to be prideful, but instead a desire to actually convey the truths of God in a more effective manner. As the project progressed I felt more and more humbled as I learned much from those who had previously worked and struggled with this topic. Also, as I underwent critique from my

own congregation I had to come back often to evaluate myself in light of what they heard, which was often different than what I had intended.

My opinion is that the biblical support for conducting this project is very strong. I believe there are multiple texts in both testaments which serve to clarify this topic. I believe the passages that I worked with in chapter 2 of this project provide the strongest biblical support for using illustrations. These offer insight into both the importance of a preacher or teacher working harder at trying to communicate on a level people can understand and about how people actually learn and process information.

I believe chapter 3 of this project is a helpful accumulation of materials on the subject of using illustrations in preaching. I believe it is not only informational but also practical. I believe it not only makes a strong case for the use of illustrations in expository preaching, but also offers a practical side as both Donald Grey Barnhouse and Charles Swindoll are discussed. The research conducted for this project encouraged me to look deeper than just the art and craft of illustrating, but further to the people who are intended to be the real beneficiaries of my labor. The project became more personally oriented around people than I ever assumed it would be at the outset.

It is my belief that the inclusion of my congregation, as a whole, is a strength of this project as they participated in both the pre-project and post-project congregational surveys. Although many survey takers may not have understood the details enough to offer an adequate evaluation, as instructed, they did however express a sense of pride in the fact that they got to assist their pastor in the completion of this project, which will likely bring about unforeseen positives in the future. This sense of accomplishment on their parts was both a surprising and positive benefit.

Additionally, the more intense focus on expository preaching during the project served only to increase their understanding. Even though I believed their understanding on this topic was greater than typical church members, I also believe they came away with an even more thorough understanding of expository preaching.

It is likely the congregation now values illustrations more than before. It seemed that most people already knew that an illustration was a facilitator of bringing truth to life, however there are various levels of quality in so doing. I believe my congregation came to expect higher quality and more well-delivered illustrations as a result of my efforts during this project.

I came to realize yet another aspect of my own non-preparedness when stepping into the pulpit. I would never have stood to preach, for instance, unfittingly dressed or without having researched, prayed, organized, or outlined my message, yet I came to recognize that many times I used illustrations haphazardly or relied on illustrations that came to me easily and were then quickly forgotten. I realized that I needed to give more time and energy to this particular aspect of sermon preparation.

I believe the focus group experience was one of the most important components of this project. Setting with a group of people immediately after my sermon for the purpose of critiquing my illustrations was a great learning experience. In some cases illustrations I thought were great, did not play so well with the group, and in other cases, illustrations which I thought were mediocre or poor actually spoke with the greatest impact to the focus group.

The most interesting thing I discovered during the focus group times was the importance of being careful not to neglect those who are younger. I consistently received

feedback from the youngest members that they did not know the background that I assumed they would know in order to understand the illustration. It was very positive for me to recognize this oversight on my part in order to correct it for the future.

The sessions of teaching teachers and lay-preachers the principles learned in my research was overall positive. I felt there were some things covered which were enlightening to the group. They seemed to indicate a newfound need to be more expository in their teaching ministries as well as more conscious of using illustrations more often and more effectively as a means by which to help their students learn. Previously they had indicated that they only saw this as a *preacher's* responsibility, but in light of the training sessions, ultimately indicated that they believed it should be theirs as well.

### **Weaknesses of the Project**

A project of this nature is limited simply in the fact that time and space restraints largely prevent it from reaching the depth that it might otherwise reach. The Scriptures, which I worked with, were by no means, an exhaustive examination of the biblical passages on this topic. Other passages could have potentially explored additional aspects of this topic.

The genre of parables was not explored. Parables certainly have relation to my topic, but they are different to the degree they need specific treatment perhaps in a more focused project. Parables are not only examples of biblical truth illustrated, they are themselves often the content of Jesus' teaching. In other words, though some parables do illustrate Jesus' teaching, many constitute the teaching itself. Some parallels could be drawn but many could not, thereby making it a very tricky discussion. I found it best to

not explore this subject at all, however there seems to be a missing component to this project when taking into account that the greatest teacher and the greatest of his teachings were omitted.

My research spanned several sources and authors, but the vast majority of helpful information was found in only a handful of works. At many points authors were quoting other authors and were not saying much that was new on the topic. Reducing all that was written down to just a few sources was difficult.

Another weakness of the project came in the fact that only a small number of persons were willing to participate in the pre-project and post-project congregational surveys. I felt like the time spent in developing the survey and promoting their taking of the survey was not worth the final product. Far fewer than I had hoped participated, and I further felt that some did not take the assignment seriously. I felt like the post-project survey, in particular was not a productive use of time in that fewer overall participated and the results mirrored the pre-project survey so closely that it provided no further insights or data. I had many stressful moments trying to figure out how to get more participation. I understand the importance of getting this information from the congregation, but I certainly could not force them to participate.

### **What I Would Do Differently**

In hindsight I would approach the overall project giving more equal weight to the academic and practical aspects. I now see that I was guilty of viewing the project more in terms of academics and less in the context of people being the central component. The books and authors studied for the project were highly important, but the practical aspects were also important, something which I failed to fully see until the

project was near completion. There has been a noticeable attitude shift on my part during this project for the better from a more strictly academic standpoint to a much more softened position.

As I reflect, I now realize I often made portions of the project more difficult than they needed to be. Instead of thinking practically, I often thought too analytically. The whole purpose was to improve the use of illustrations in my practice of expository preaching but I largely approached the project with the belief that there was a psychological component which would lead me to analyze people more closely and determine how to manipulate, as needed, to produce a desired effect. In time I came to realize it was much more simple, and that manipulation was not to be any part of the overall picture. All I really needed to do was work hard, plan carefully, do my best and rely on the Holy Spirit to work in hearts.

I would have approached the pre-project and post-project congregational surveys differently. Neither proved to be very insightful and both produced a less than desirable number of responses. I really do not know of a way these could have been emphasized any more than they were.

I spent more time on chapter 3 of this project than was necessary. My research yielded considerably more material than I needed to produce the chapter. My time would have been better spent processing and analyzing the information instead of searching for more.

### **Theological Reflections**

On the surface, my topic may not seem as theologically oriented as some, but in reality there are a number of theological implications. The starting place for this

project was to explore how the Word of God might be better communicated to the people of God through proper illustration. I was regularly reminded that the text of Scripture is sacred, and that preaching is not about making a speech and eliciting a positive response from an audience, but about being faithful and accurate in the exposition and communication of God's Word. My goal was to understand how illustrations could help further my faithfulness and accuracy in exposition.

Throughout the course of this project my love for and commitment to expository preaching was strengthened. I believe the Word God gave to people is of utmost importance and needs to be understood by mankind. In many regards, my position as a preacher of the Gospel came into a sharper focus as I saw more and more the importance of handling that sacred word with accuracy and with clarity. Illustrating well proved itself again and again a natural outflow of my commitment to preaching in an expository manner.

Merely going through the exercise of preaching does not fulfill the theological mandate of preaching. There is an expectation that God's Word actually be communicated. Discovering newer and more effective ways to communicate should not merely be optional for the preacher but should be seen by him as his duty.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 1:21, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." If preaching itself is called foolishness by Paul, then how much more the feeble illustrations which form a portion of those messages preached. I was reminded throughout that God is



sovereign over the message and he works through the Holy Spirit to accomplish his purposes. My level of humility has greatly increased as a result of this project.

If life were mere chance and endless series of disconnected events, preaching would almost need to be manipulative in order to produce a desired effect. But, since life is not mere chance and God is unmistakably sovereign, we can be confident that he uses preachers but does not allow the final outcome to be dependent upon what preachers do. Preachers fail when they fail to be obedient, but the Word of God does not fail. His Word does not return unto him void, but it accomplishes all that he has set forth it should do. The destiny of mankind is too important to rest solely in the hands of other men.

The role of the Holy Spirit in preaching is unmistakable, yet largely mysterious. Somehow the Spirit takes the spoken Word of God during the message preached and changes hearts turning them toward God. Illustration is often an integral part of this work of the Spirit. The mechanics of how this is accomplished is beyond our knowledge or understanding, but we observe the effect in the form of changed lives. As I reflect, I cannot help but consider the unique nature of this sort of partnering with the Holy Spirit as he uses me and other preachers to bring about changes in lives.

Throughout the duration of my project, I have felt his presence guiding me throughout the process of preparation and delivery. Not until my work on this project did I fully see how the Spirit works in every portion of the process, including time spent in preparation, and even specifically the exposition of the text and even the illustrating of biblical truths.

### **Personal Reflections**

I have always held God's Word in high esteem; however, this project has forced me to view it in a much deeper manner. One of the principle ways has been in my

seeing it not merely from my vantage point but also from the vantage point of others. This project has taken away some of the selfish tendencies I had where the Word of God was concerned and broadened it out to consider also how others view it and receive its content. There have been times during this process that I felt like a third party observer watching and listening to both myself and the congregation. That practice has helped me considerably approach the whole process with more objectivity.

Through the careful study of the scriptural passages I worked with in this project I have found a new level of appreciation for God's extensive means whereby to communicate his truth to his people. Rather than merely giving his Word, he actually went to great lengths to put it in terms they could comprehend. The passages I worked with for chapter 2 allowed me to see a different side of God than what I had previously known. I saw a depth to the character of God than had previously been within my grasp. Viewing Hosea as a living illustration of the love of God was particularly poignant to me. Overall each of the scriptural passages spoke loudly to me as I processed them in my heart and mind then collected my thoughts for writing. In all of this I found a challenge for my ministry as I seek to be more effective and obedient.

Not until this project did I ever see any theological implications for using illustrations in preaching. My understanding had always been that they were a luxury that could be included if time and space permitted. I chose this topic because I believed I needed help using illustrations more effectively, but never expected to be challenged with understanding them in a whole new way. Now as I reflect, I believe failure to illustrate is to fail to recognize the preacher's responsibility to faithfully communicate God's Word. I went from seeing them as a helpful tool to a necessary tool.

## **Conclusion**

This project has been a great learning experience for me. It has broadened my perspective and challenged me in a positive manner. I look at several aspects of preaching differently including the preparation process, the choosing and developing of illustrations, the delivery of illustrations, and am far more conscious of how the congregation is actually hearing what I say. Instead of believing my work was completed through delivery, I now see it extending even further. The illustration is likely what will be remembered long term.

The pursuit of knowledge is good, but learning how to better communicate that knowledge is also of vital importance. My hope is that I will continually keep knowledge gained in balance with a desire to teach that knowledge to others in a way they can understand.

## APPENDIX 1

### PRE-PROJECT AND POST-PROJECT CONGREGATIONAL SURVEY

Survey participants were asked to rate their answer to the questions on a scale of 1 – 5 with a “1” representing strong disagreement and a “5” representing strong agreement with a “3” representing neutrality or no opinion. By circling a “4” survey participants were indicating “somewhat disagreement” with the statement. By circling “2” they were indicating “somewhat disagreement” with the statement.

#### **Agreement to Participate**

The research in which you are about to participate is designed to evaluate the level of understanding you have of expository preaching. This research is being conducted by Allen Raynor for his Doctor of Ministry project which has as its aim to improve the use of illustrations in expository preaching. In this research you are asked to answer some basic questions regarding your understanding of expository preaching. Any information you provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will your name be reported, or your identity revealed. Participation in this research is completely voluntary.

Please consider the following statements carefully and rate your level of agreement or disagreement by circling the most appropriate number according to the following scale.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Undecided	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree

- 1) I prefer what I consider to be a “teaching” style in favor of what I consider a “preaching” style in sermon delivery. 5 4 3 2 1
- 2) When interpreting Scripture, it is more important to know the author’s intent than it is to discern what the text means to me. 5 4 3 2 1
- 3) A full dependence upon the Holy Spirit is really all that is needed in the preparation and delivery of a sermon. 5 4 3 2 1
- 4) A verse by verse explanation of a passage is the best means for spiritual development of the congregation as a whole. 5 4 3 2 1
- 5) The difference between my understanding of “preaching” and teaching can best be described as, “preaching” is often louder and more animated, whereas “teaching” is more laid back. 5 4 3 2 1
- 6) Preaching with emotion accentuates the truth of the text.  
5 4 3 2 1
- 7) The Bible is divinely inspired and therefore without error, reliable, and relevant, even in our modern culture. 5 4 3 2 1
- 8) The preacher must spend considerable time in preparation, including careful study and prayer before attempting to preach from the pulpit.  
5 4 3 2 1
- 9) A verse by verse explanation of the Bible is the most effective method of communicating biblical truth. 5 4 3 2 1
- 10) Generally, I get more out of the personal stories in a sermon than any other part. 5 4 3 2 1
- 11) I prefer preaching from a variety of biblical passages rather than long series on books of the Bible or portions of books. 5 4 3 2 1
- 12) I believe personal stories are the most important part of a sermon.  
5 4 3 2 1

- 13) Based on my understanding, “expository” preaching and “biblical” preaching are one and the same. 5 4 3 2 1
- 14) Understanding the meaning of specific words within a passage is critical to correct interpretation of the Bible. 5 4 3 2 1
- 15) I believe the meaning of a biblical text can be different depending on who is interpreting it. 5 4 3 2 1
- 16) I believe without personal stories, a sermon is not really a sermon. 5 4 3 2 1
- 17) I believe the trend is away from biblical preaching in our present culture. 5 4 3 2 1
- 18) I believe most preaching today is biblical in nature and content. 5 4 3 2 1
- 19) I believe verse by verse exposition of a passage is the most effective way for me to learn both meaning and proper application to my life. 5 4 3 2 1
- 20) I believe the use of personal stories helps me to apply biblical truth to my life. 5 4 3 2 1

## APPENDIX 2

### SERMON SERIES ON HEBREWS 11

For the duration of a 6-week period a sermon series was preached from Hebrews 11 with particular emphasis given to finding, honing, and using illustrations in the messages preached. This portion of the project took place between weeks 3 – 8.

Week 3 – “Faith Leading to Understanding (vs. 1-7)

Week 4 – “Faith in the Lives of Abraham and Sarah” (vs. 8-12)

Week 5 – “Faith as a Heritage” (vs. 13-16)

Week 6 – “Faith in the Lives of the Patriarchs” (vs. 17-22)

Week 7 – “Faith in the Life of Moses” (vs. 23-29)

Week 8 – “Faith Overcoming to Victory!” (vs. 30-40)

### APPENDIX 3

#### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Focus Group Questions. Please circle the number which best corresponds with your opinion according to the following scale.

5	4	3	2	1
Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Undecided	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree

- 1) I understand the meaning of today's sermon 5 4 3 2 1
- 2) I believe the sermon was expository 5 4 3 2 1
- 3) I understand this passage more thoroughly than I did before today's sermon 5 4 3 2 1
- 4) I believe I will remember a particular personal story used in today's sermon for a long time to come 5 4 3 2 1  
If you agreed with this statement, please identify the particular personal story in a few words. \_\_\_\_\_



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## ABSTRACT

### A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THE USE OF ILLUSTRATIONS IN EXPOSITORY PREACHING AT FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, BROOMFIELD, COLORADO

Allen Ray Raynor, D.Min.  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012  
Faculty Supervisor: Brian Vickers, Ph.D.

This Doctor of Ministry project examines the biblical and practical rationale for the use of illustrations in expository preaching. Chapter 1 gives an introduction to the topic and gives the ministry context for which the project was conducted.

Chapter 2 is an examination of some key passages from both the Old and New Testaments relevant to illustration. Particular emphasis is given to Ecclesiastes 12:9-11, Ezekiel 37:1-14, Hosea 3:1, Acts 17:28, Romans 10:14, and 2 Corinthians 4:7.

Chapter 3 focuses on examples of how to illustrate points in expository preaching. Principles are given on how to determine the needs of the original audience as well as a contemporary audience. Framing the illustration and filling the frame are examined. Donald Grey Barnhouse and Charles Swindoll are given as examples and brief commentary is provided.

Chapter 4 reports the results of a 15-week project. The project includes project methodology, data collection, and analysis.



Chapter 5 is an evaluation of the entire project. The evaluation includes the project's purpose, goals, strengths, weaknesses, theological reflections and personal reflections.

## VITA

Allen Ray Raynor

### PERSONAL

Born: December 25, 1971  
Parents: Ray and Deana Raynor  
Married: Tommi Jacqueline Park, August 6, 1993  
Children: Rebekah Jo, born August 2, 1995  
Mark Allen, born August 8, 1997  
Ryan Dean, born March 11, 1999  
Devin Thomas, born December 20, 2001

### EDUCATIONAL

Diploma, Sequoyah High School, Claremore, Oklahoma, 1990  
B.A., Oklahoma Baptist University, 1994  
M.Div., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2004

### MINISTERIAL

Minister of Youth, First Baptist Church, Verdigris Oklahoma, 1994-1995  
Pastor, Southeast Baptist Church, Pryor, Oklahoma, 1995-1996  
Pastor, Vivian Baptist Church, Eufaula, Oklahoma, 1996-2000  
Pastor, Boone Creek Baptist Church, Licking, Missouri, 2000-2003  
Pastor, First Baptist Church, Broomfield, Colorado, 2005-2011  
Pastor, First Baptist Church, New London, Missouri, 2011-