



THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION IN EXPOSITORY SERMON CONSTRUCTION

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ABSTRACT

While expository preaching is a biblically faithful model, this method of preaching can result in boring recitations of research. In order to bring life to expository sermons, this article argues that imagination serves an important and necessary role in expository sermon construction. First, this article presents an original definition of imagination as it relates to expository sermons. Second, a biblical survey of terms relating to imagination reveals that Scripture advocates for its use, as well as how to use the imagination. Third, this article addresses potential pitfalls when engaging the imagination and offers boundaries to ensure appropriate use. Fourth, this article addresses the level of importance of imagination to the sermon construction process. Fifth, every aspect of sermon construction benefits from imagination, as this section demonstrates. Finally, the reader will receive practical tips for improving imaginative powers.

INTRODUCTION

Expository preaching serves the church by finding a biblical author's original meaning and translating it to a contemporary congregation. While this method of preaching is biblically faithful, expository preaching can become a cumbersome

recitation of research rather than a powerful proclamation of God's Word. Such lecturing couched as preaching leads to boredom, and Dr. Robert Smith alleges that boring preaching is a sin.

So how can a preacher avoid the sin of boring preaching while heralding exegesis? The Bible expositor can bring sermons to life by utilizing imagination.

Homiletics textbooks approve and encourage the use of imagination. Yet few of these books give a definition of imagination. It is nearly impossible to find one homiletics textbook that gives an explicit, biblical basis for use of imagination in sermon preparation or construction, though some offer hints and implicit Bible references. Therefore, a preacher wondering if, and how, to use imagination in preaching is left wanting, perhaps discouraging the preacher from the appropriate use of imagination in a sermon. In contrast, those who do use their imaginations may need guardrails to protect them from eisegesis or improper allegory. And even those who believe that reliance on imagination is important may be unsure how to implement it into the sermon.

With these concerns in mind, this article argues that imagination serves an important and necessary role in expository sermon construction. First, the reader will need to reach a definition of imagination, particularly as it relates to the subjects of exegesis and homiletics. Second, a biblical survey of terms relating to imagination determines whether Scripture advocates for its use and, if so, how. Third, potential dangers involving the use of imagination by preachers are set out, as well as suggestive boundaries to ensure appropriate use within the confines of proper exposition. Fourth, this article addresses the level of importance of imagination to the sermon construction process. Fifth, the reader will discover that every step of the expository sermon process, from exegesis to sermon construction, can benefit from imagination. Finally, this article offers practical tips for improving the preacher's imaginative prowess. At the conclusion of the article, the reader will understand the role of

imagination in expository sermon construction and be able to impart actual methods for application and improvement in imaginative preaching.

DEFINING IMAGINATION

To determine the role of imagination in expository sermon construction, one must have a working definition of imagination as it relates to homiletics. Several homileticians offer deficient definitions or meanings devoid of relation to preaching. In his seminal work on the imagination in preaching and teaching, Warren Wiersbe provides a general definition of the imagination, neglecting any homiletical meaning.¹ Wiersbe defines imagination as “the image-making faculty in your mind, the picture gallery in which you are constantly painting, sculpting, designing and sometimes erasing.” Similarly, Truls Akerlund quotes Walter Brueggemann’s definition as “the capacity to generate and enunciate images of reality that are not rooted in the world in front of us.”² In *Text-Driven Preaching*, Robert Vogel defines the imagination parenthetically as “the image-making and image-perceiving capacity within us.”³ Unfortunately, these definitions do not address preaching, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, or the conscious involvement of the mind and they allow for images of fancy or desire.

Jerry Vines and Jim Shaddix advance the definition farther than the previous explanations. They write, “Imagination is the capacity of the mind to receive a bombardment of ideas and impulses that well up from the subconscious mind. Imagination provides the capacity to “dream dreams and see visions.”⁴ There are several positive aspects about this meaning. First, it places imagination in the realm of the mind, distinguishing the conscious mind from the subconscious mind. Additionally, the authors make a connection to a biblical text, Joel 2:28. Lastly, the authors connect imagination to the practice of meditating on Scripture. They suggest, “As you meditate, put your imagination to work on the Scripture passage as an additional positive step

toward creativity.”⁵ The most obvious weakness of this definition is the absence of the Holy Spirit’s influence on the preacher.”⁶

John Broadus, author of *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, claims, “Imagination is the imagining function of the mind. It is thinking by seeing, as contrasted with reasoning. It begins with the accumulated elements of experience, observation, and knowledge.”⁷ Later, Broadus adds, “Imagination should be thought of not simply as the imaging function of the mind, but that function controlled by facts, with the end result of placing facts in new combinations and relationships.”⁸ Broadus’ definition looks to the mind as the incubator of imaging, whereas Vines and Shaddix attribute images and impulses to the subconscious mind. Broadus also claims the imagination organizes and arranges these images into combinations and relationships. Yet Broadus also misses the opportunity to add the Holy Spirit.

One of the best definitions of imagination comes from Henry Ward Beecher in his *Yale Lectures on Preaching*. First, he aligns imagination with faith. Beecher writes, “Imagination of this kind is the true germ of faith; it is the power of conceiving as definite the things which are invisible to the senses, of giving them distinct shape. And this, not merely in your own thoughts, but with the power of presenting the things which experience cannot primarily teach to other people’s minds, so that they shall be just as obvious as though seen with the bodily eye.”⁹ Later he states, “The imagination, then, is that power of the mind by which it conceives of invisible things, and is able to present them as though they were visible to others.”¹⁰ Beecher explicitly credits imagination as a result of faith, which is seeing the invisible. But Beecher also includes the imagination of listeners as part of the definition. The preacher engages his imagination to form images so that he can then seek to help the listeners form those same images in their minds. Like the other definitions, this one also does not mention the work of the Holy Spirit.

Having reviewed the literature, this article must settle on a definition. It must be one that addresses the work of the

conscious and subconscious mind. It also must reference work of the Holy Spirit on the preacher. Additionally, the definition should include the ingredients of imagination, such as experiences, observations, and knowledge. Finally, it must address the purpose of transmitting the image into the imaginations of the listeners. Thus, this paper defines imagination, for purposes of homiletics and sermon construction, as follows:

Imagination is the capacity of a preacher by faith, and with the filling of the Holy Spirit, to call upon the experiences, observations, and knowledge within one's subconscious mind for the purpose of organizing and arranging them during a time of intentional conscious thought or meditation into a picture or image that describes or represents the concept considered and allows for its transmission, through communication, to another person's imagination.

BIBLICAL SURVEY FOR DESCRIPTIVE OR PRESCRIPTIVE ADVOCACY FOR IMAGINATION

Having proposed a definition for imagination in sermon construction, the next issue requiring resolution is whether the Bible advocates the use of imagination in preaching and, if so, whether it does so prescriptively or descriptively. To begin with, there is prescriptive advocacy for the use of imagination in sermon construction from 1 Timothy 4:15. In 1 Timothy 4:11-15, Paul challenges Timothy, who is serving as pastor of a congregation, to the following:

Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was

given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.

The word immerse comes from the Greek word *μελετάω*, which means to meditate. Tracking *μελετάω* through the Septuagint (LXX), one will discover that the writers use this word to represent two Hebrew words.¹¹ The first use relates to Genesis 6:5, which says, “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Intention represents the translation of the Greek word from the root of *μελετάω*. The Hebrew rendering of *μελετάω* is from the root *יָצַו*, which means imagination. Thus, the Scripture demonstrates in this verse that imagination can work negatively.

Fortunately, there is another Hebrew word that is associated with *μελετάω* that places a positive spin on the text. In Joshua 1:8, the writer says, “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.” The word meditate, while sharing the Greek translation of *μελετάω*, appears through a Hebrew word that has the root of *הִתְחַלֵּץ*. God commands Joshua to meditate on the Scriptures day and night, just as Paul challenges Timothy to immerse himself in the Scriptures. This same root word is found in Psalm 1:2, which reads, “[B]ut his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.” Thus, one can see that Paul is commanding Timothy to immerse himself on the Word of God through meditation.

But what do immersion and meditation have to do with imagination? In *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Don Whitney writes, “The kind of meditation encouraged in the Bible differs from other kinds of meditation in several ways. While some advocate a kind of meditation in which you do your best to empty your mind, Christian meditation involves filling your

mind with God and his truth.”¹² In other words, biblical meditation calls on the Christian to immerse his or her mind on the Word of God. He continues, “And while Christian history has always had a place for the sanctified use of our God-given imagination in meditation, imagination is our servant to help us meditate on things that are true.”¹³ So Whitney sees a role for imagination in the meditation needed for Bible reading. Pastor John MacArthur also relates meditation and imagination. In his book *Preaching*, MacArthur asserts, “Meditation is an important, final step in the process. Meditation entails focusing the mind on one subject, involving reason, imagination, and emotions.”¹⁴ Thus, MacArthur sees imagination as one of three necessary components to effective meditation. Because of Paul’s challenge to a New Testament pastor in 1 Timothy 4:15 to immerse, or meditate on Scripture, and in light of the commands from Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1:2 for meditation, the Scripture prescriptively advocates for the role of imagination as a function of meditation for pastors today engaging in the teaching of God’s Word.

If one is not persuaded of Scriptures prescriptive advocacy of imagination, there is more than sufficient evidence for descriptive advocacy. Wayne McDill sees the use of imagination throughout the Bible. He writes, “As the Bible writers have done, we must translate spiritual reality into earthly images which can be grasped by the mind of man. Our faith calls for the truth to be visualized.”¹⁵ The Old Testament abounds with such imagery, especially the Psalms and Wisdom literature. But even in narrative works, the writers use imagery in various ways. In 2 Samuel 12:1-4, Nathan addresses King David’s adultery and murder through use of an imaginary story involving a poor person whose kid lamb was stolen and eaten by a wealthy man. Through the prophet’s use of inspired imagery, the message “went straight to David’s heart and turned his life back to God’s way. He identified with the experience and emotions of both men in the parable, having been both a poor shepherd and a rich, powerful king.”¹⁶ Thus, Nathan’s reliance upon imagery serves as a descriptive example for imaginative preaching.

In "How to Include Imagination in Sermon Prep," Jeffrey Arthurs sees imaginative writing in two other Old Testament texts. He affirms the imagery of Proverbs 19:12, so the reader can "feel the dew on the grass." He also calls on preachers to "huddle in your imaginations in the rainstorm in the open square" in Ezra 10:9.¹⁷ The Old Testament is not written in cold, rationalistic propositions. God chooses to express portions of his Word through imagery, with concrete and sensate language, in the Old Testament. Therefore, the preacher is on solid ground to rely upon his imagination in sermon construction.

Regarding the New Testament, one need only look to Jesus and Paul to see the use of imagination in exposition. In *Recapturing the Voice of God*, the author boldly proclaims, "The parables of Jesus come from the very imagination of God. This means that every detail and nuance, every character development and plot first existed in the imagination of God."¹⁸ What an amazing and profound observation! The parables of Jesus do not come from history or current events, but from his creativity and imagination. For this reason, Thomas Liske advocates for the use of imagination in preaching. He writes, "There should be a liberal use of imagery in sermons not merely because Christ, the Master Preacher, used figurative language, but because of the nature of imagery itself."¹⁹ Thus, these fictionalized stories come from the imagination of the Son of God, the Master Preacher, for the purpose of teaching and preaching to hearers and offer descriptive advocacy for imagination in sermon construction. Likewise, John R.W. Stott identifies Paul as an expositor that addresses a congregation with imagination. He states:

Paul referred to his preaching of the Cross to the Galatians as a public portrayal before their very eyes of Jesus Christ as the one who had been crucified (Gal. 3:1). Now the crucifixion had taken place some twenty years previously, and none of Paul's Galatian readers had been present to witness it. Yet by his vivid proclamation Paul had been

able to bring this event out of the past into the present, out of hearsay into a dramatic visual image. It is to stimulate people's imagination and to help them to see things clearly in their minds.

Stott recognizes the imagery Paul uses to put the cross in the forefront of the Galatian readers' minds and hearts. Paul's use of the phrase "before their very eyes" is not one of deception but of description. He wants the church to see the crucifixion of Jesus in a real way through their imaginations. With these examples from Jesus and Paul, the preacher who engages in imaginative preaching finds New Testament warrant.

In summary, the Bible advocates both prescriptively and descriptively for the role of imagination in sermon construction. Through Paul's admonition to Timothy, Paul also charges preachers today to immerse themselves in the Word of God through meditative and imaginative thought. Though this instruction is singular, it is powerful and relevant. Additionally, the Bible provides numerous descriptive authorities for the use of imagination in preaching. Both the Old and New Testaments show examples of preachers and inspired authors drawing upon their imaginations to paint a picture in the minds of the readers or hearers. Because the Bible advocates for its use both prescriptively and descriptively, preachers should ensure the addition of imagination in their sermon construction process.

IMAGINATION'S LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE TO EXPOSITORY SERMON CONSTRUCTION

Since the Bible appears to advocate for the preacher's use of imagination, one may be inclined to omit a discussion about imagination's level of importance to expository sermon construction. If the Bible commends it, one should follow it. Yet advocacy and importance are not synonymous. Just because something is warranted does not make it essential. Interestingly, there is significant variation among homiletics textbooks

regarding imagination's level of importance to the sermon process. There are those who believe that the imagination is unimportant to biblical sermon construction. There are others who recommend it but fall short of requiring it. Others argue that the use of imagination is essential for an effective sermon. These positions will be addressed in turn.

Bryan Chapell and Thomas Long argue that imagination serves little to no purpose in sermon construction. To be fair, Chapell notes that imagination can be useful when preaching narratives,²⁰ but he claims that a "minister's imagination is a poor place to discern what a biblical passage means."²¹ In other words, Chapell allows for imaginative transmission, but he opposes imagination in the exegetical process. Long not only joins Chapell in his view, but he goes further. David Fleeer, writing about Long, notes that Long abandons interest in pleasing listeners through persuasive techniques, which include use of the imagination. Particularly, he writes, "Long judges that, on occasion, teaching, 'a necessity,' renders as inappropriate the 'sweetness' of pleasing."²² Clearly, Chapell and Long find little or no regard for imagination in sermon construction, while allowing that Chapell makes some minimal room for its use in preaching narratives.

On the other hand, William Evans and J. Spencer Kennard seem to recommend imagination as a useful tool, but they avoid requiring it in expository sermon construction. Evans writes, "The imagination, within a limited sphere and carefully safeguarded, may be drawn on as a fruitful source of picture making."²³ Thus, Evans supposes imagination in sermon construction to be discretionary rather than mandatory. He does reference imagination's result of picture making as "fruitful," which tends to demonstrate his commendation of its implementation. Similarly, Kennard has a discretionary view of imagination. He says, "Imagination and enthusiasm, which may be regarded as twin sisters, are valuable factors in arousing the will."²⁴ Factors are not elements and, therefore, are not necessary to the substance of a claim. Therefore, Kennard holds

imagination out as a factor among others that preachers may wield to persuade listeners. As such, Evans and Kennard recommend the use of imagination in sermon construction.

But the greater weight of evidence, based on the number of homiletics books that advocate this position and the arguments presented, favors imagination as essential for expository sermon construction. Warren Wiersbe includes imagination in his definition for biblical preaching.²⁵ In *Biblical Preaching*, Haddon Robinson heralds, "Effective biblical preaching requires . . . imagination."²⁶ Famed pastor Charles Spurgeon told his students, "We must throw all our . . . imagination . . . into the delivery of the gospel."²⁷ Ralph Lewis and John Broadus use even stronger language to demonstrate the necessity of imagination in preaching. Lewis writes, "A well-trained imagination is indispensable to the public speaker. The secret of creative speaking lies in an active imagination."²⁸ The reader will note that inclusion of the word active in Lewis' proclamation, dismissing any notion that the preacher's imagination comes passively through the subconscious. Broadus, in his seminal work *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, affirms, "Beginning at the point of technique it may be said that imagination is of indispensable value in the construction of discourse. To give familiar materials any fresh interest, they must be brought into new combination."²⁹ For Broadus, imagination is indispensable not just for illustration, introduction, or conclusion, but for all aspects of constructing an expository sermon. Travis DuPriest adds an interesting twist on this conversation. He reminds the reader that "[t]he Word we preach and the way we preach it shape who God is in the mind's eye . . . so from the pulpit we preach the God we imagine."³⁰ What reason can be offered that more clearly places imagination in the category of essential in preaching? In order to effectively preach expository sermons and transmit that message into the minds of listeners, imagination is essential.

POTENTIAL DANGERS AND APPROPRIATE SAFEGUARDS
FOR IMAGINATION IN SERMON CONSTRUCTION

While the use of imagination is essential to effective expository sermon construction, the preacher must be alert to potential dangers when implementing it and set appropriate safeguards to prevent eisegesis or manipulation. The most obvious, and dangerous, problem for imagination in sermon construction is the potential for eisegesis. A preacher understands that the “creative imagination,” as Graeme Goldsworthy puts it, is not meant “in the sense of making up some fiction.”³¹ Rather than imagination, Broadus understands such an “ungoverned, unprincipled process” as “fancy.”³² Thus, Goldsworthy and Broadus approve a use of the imagination so long as it does not drift into fictional fancy. In the realm of biblical hermeneutics, this fictional fancy is termed eisegesis.

Many homiletics texts warn about the use of eisegesis, particularly regarding the imaginative process. In *Engaging Exposition*, Daniel Akin, Bill Curtis, and Stephen Rummage argue, “The faithful expositor must not eisegete the text, reading into it the preconceived notions of his imagination or interests.”³³ Later, the book references that the preacher’s “goal should be to ferret out the indication of the text, not to foist upon it some imagination of his own.”³⁴ Likewise, Raymond W. McLaughlin opines, “Another hermeneutical problem reported was that of reading one’s own meaning into a text of Scripture.”³⁵ Chapell asserts that imagination in interpretation leaves the meaning of Scripture in the hands of the reader. He says, “[I]f anything in Scripture can mean whatever our imaginations suggest rather than what Scripture determines, then our opinions become as authoritative as the statements of God and we can make the Bible say anything we want.”³⁶ This improper use of imagination produces a fictional meaning for the text, rather than a faithful interpretation from the original writer’s intent. Renowned expositor D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones affirms this concern, stating, “The danger is that imagination tends to run away with us and one can easily cross the line from which it has been helpful to that point, once more, where it draws attention to itself and you have

lost contact with the Truth which gave origin to it.”³⁷ Pastor John MacArthur notes, “Where creativity is strong, so is the danger that it can turn a preacher away from the exposition of Scripture. We need to guard against this without suppressing legitimate creativity.”³⁸ Thus, MacArthur sees the danger of imagination, as these other authors do, but he allows for its use so long as it is guarded.

The appropriate safeguard against eisegesis is for the imagination to remain within the confines of proper biblical exposition of the text. In his book *Him We Proclaim*, Dennis Johnson suggests an apostolic, Christ-centered hermeneutic “that places appropriate checks on the preacher’s hyperactive imagination, thereby assuring listeners that the message is revealed by God, not merely generated by human creativity.”³⁹ In other words, proper exegesis and exposition serve as a check on the unlimited and ungoverned use of imagination in sermon construction. John R. W. Stott makes this connection as well, writing, “So then, in our sermon preparation, we must not try to by-pass the discipline itself. We have to be ready to pray and think ourselves deep into the text, even under it, until we give up all pretensions of being its master or manipulator and become instead its humble and obedient servant. Then there will be no danger of unscrupulous text-twisting.”⁴⁰ As one can see, Stott applauds the use of thinking, meditating, and imagining in sermon construction. But Stott admonishes the preacher to the discipline of praying and thinking within the confines of the text’s original intent, not in fanciful fiction created within the mind of the preacher. Of course, having a broad understanding of biblical doctrine also serves to safeguard the use of imagination in preaching. Michael Pasquarello III argues, “Doctrine is therefore the necessary grammar of Christian discourse that helps to protect correct reference to God and disciplines our propensity to idolatry.”⁴¹ By confining the imagination within the proper understanding of the text, within the boundaries of biblical doctrine, the danger of eisegesis from

the use of imagination in sermon construction can be appropriately safeguarded.

Another potential danger of imagination in preaching concerns the transmission of the preacher's content to the listeners for the purpose of manipulation. This concern for manipulation serves as the basis for Duane Litfin's work, *Paul's Theology of Preaching*. He writes, "My point is that the goal of preaching should be so to present the gospel that the listener comprehends, sees, is grasped by the issues involved. This may well include and even require the use of emotional appeals, but those appeals will be directed toward helping the listener to comprehend, not toward inducing him to yield."⁴² In other words, manipulation represents an improper use for imagination, particularly if used for purposes of persuasion in preaching. John Nicholls Booth joins in Litfin's concern, saying, "To excite an audience to tears or laughter merely for the sense of power provided is only a refined manifestation of the characteristics of a childish bully."⁴³ These harsh critiques against manipulation appropriately recognize the potential danger of a preacher's use of imagination solely to obtain a reaction out of listeners. This conduct should be avoided.

The appropriate guardrail against imagination as manipulation is reliance on the Holy Spirit. In *Preaching and Sermon Construction*, Paul Bull affirms the Holy Spirit as the safeguard against improper persuasion. He writes, "No art of persuasion can be of any value unless it is at every moment penetrated through and through by the light and power of the Holy Spirit."⁴⁴ The preacher should not force a picture into the minds of the congregation but allow the Holy Spirit to illumine both his mind and the minds of the listeners. Wayne McDill concurs, proclaiming, "The preacher, then, must draw the picture of spiritual reality which the imagination can present to the 'eyes of the heart.' The Holy Spirit then spiritually 'enlightens' that picture as truth so that faith is awakened, and the believer is able to 'see' what is otherwise unseen."⁴⁵ These comments explain this paper's insistence upon the Holy Spirit's inclusion in a definition

of imagination for homiletics. The preacher must trust the work of the Holy Spirit to take the pictures that are formed in the mind through meditation and transmit them to the hearers, so they see what the preachers sees within the confines of the original meaning of the passage. The Holy Spirit is necessary to the imaginative process to overcome the temptation to manipulate.

Some authors, however, see an actual danger regarding imagination in preaching that is unexpected. This danger is that the preacher refuses to use imagination in sermon construction at all. While Jeffrey Arthurs acknowledges the possibility of misuse in imagination, he writes, “[A] more frequent problem is the suppression of imagination. We chop the literature of the Bible into smidgeons of data, re-form it as an exegetical McNugget, pickle it, package it, and call it “exegesis.”⁴⁶ This danger is the regular complaint against expository preaching. The preacher researches the text, obtains the original intent of the author, but simply regurgitates the facts gleaned from the research without creativity or imagination to his congregation. Some preachers may do that because they feel that imagination and imagery take away from the dignity of the preaching moment. But Ronald Sleeth disagrees. In *Persuasive Preaching*, he notes, “Dignity does not mean dullness. He has every right to make his material not only interesting but exciting. It is heartening to see a skillful preacher take an old theme and come at it in a new way.”⁴⁷ While some may claim that imagination in preaching may lead to “sensationalism,” David Burrell has a different take on this concern. He writes, “The charge of sensationalism is generally made by dried-up ministers who cannot get an audience.”⁴⁸ This stinging rebuke recognizes that there is a danger that those who refuse or do not know how to implement imagination into the sermon construction process may view others with disdain because of their own shortcomings or misunderstandings. While certain dangers abound, the preacher can employ his imaginative capacities in expository sermon construction by remaining within the boundaries of the original meaning of the text and through reliance on the Holy

Spirit to enlighten the minds of the listeners and help them receive the images conceived within the preacher's mind.

IMPLEMENTING IMAGINATION INTO EXPOSITORY SERMON CONSTRUCTION

Perhaps the reason why some preachers avoid the exercise of imagination during sermon construction is simply because they do not know how to use it. Illustrations within the introduction, conclusion, and even in the body seem like a logical place to employ imagination. But are those the only places where the use of imagination is appropriate in forming the sermon? The preacher can, and should, implement imagination in every aspect of sermon construction. The imagination has a place in sermon preparation, introductions, explanations, illustrations, applications, and conclusions.

Imagination should begin in the exegesis process. Of course, the danger of eisegesis looms and has been previously addressed. But the imagination plays a significant part in helping the preacher understand and experience in his mind the interpretation of a text. Paul Bull writes, "[W]hen we say that a preacher must see his subject with his imagination, we mean that he must see it as it really is in God's mind, stripped of the illusions which gather round a concept as soon as it is conceived in a human brain."⁴⁹ In other words, the preacher is not making up what he believes the passage should say. Instead, he conceives a vision in his creative mind of what the original author reveals. Stott says, "To begin with, we have to transport ourselves back, by the use of both our knowledge and our imagination, into the biblical writer's context, until we begin to think what he thought and feel what he felt."⁵⁰ In Stott's view, gathering data and knowledge is insufficient for proper exegesis. The imagination is needed to help the preacher experience the meaning. Howard and William Hendricks dedicate an entire chapter to the use of imagination in biblical interpretation. They denounce preachers' failure to avail themselves of imagination, saying, "Often when

we come to the Scriptures, we use the least imaginative, most overworked approaches possible.”⁵¹ In an earlier chapter on atmosphere, they state, “Reading for atmosphere involves picking up the setting and feelings from the biblical text.”⁵² This is an exercise for the imagination, not just the intellect. Engaging the imagination allows the preacher to discover the mood the original author intended to evoke through the text as well. Jeffrey Arthurs asserts, “We can identify that mood by reading slowly and imaginatively. Even though hermeneutics texts offer few tools for exegeting the affective quality of texts, I believe that most preachers possess enough sensitivity to identify the dominant mood of the passage.”⁵³ Thus, exegeting the text goes beyond information gathering and research. Complete biblical exegesis requires the preacher to bring his imagination, under the filling of the Holy Spirit and within the confines of the text, to experience the feelings and moods the biblical author intended to convey.

After thoroughly exegeting the text, the imagination has a role in every aspect of expository sermon construction. The introduction of the sermon brings the first opportunity for use of imagination, and it also offers the preacher a chance to gain the listeners’ attention. Judith McDaniel argues, “[T]he opening three minutes provide the listener with an ‘appetizer,’ an inkling of the stance from which to consider the issue being presented.”⁵⁴ Because of the importance of earning a hearing early in the message, the preacher should use his imagination to form a gripping and biblically appropriate introduction. Pastor John MacArthur alleges, “Only a preacher’s imagination and creativity limit the kinds of effective introductions.”⁵⁵ Broadus recommends the pastor create an introduction out of his own imagination. He writes, “[T]he preacher should use his imagination. In other words, he should create his own introduction. Out of the stored materials in his mind he can develop an introduction that fits the sermon.”⁵⁶ One of the most effective tools to develop an introduction are vivid illustrations, which will be addressed later. Regardless, the introduction is a

place that requires the preacher to involve his imaginative capacities.

Within the body of the sermon, the explanation of the biblical text is likely the place that preachers think imagination would not apply. But nothing could be further from the truth. John Broadus writes:

Another use of imagination . . . is in realizing and depicting what the Scriptures reveal. One can only make history real by an imaginative revival in his own mind of the scenes, persons, and events of the past, by thinking oneself back into a period, or bringing it forward to our own time, and mentally observing and participating in what transpires.⁵⁷

Broadus not only advocates imagination in exegesis, but also in depicting it for the hearers in the explanation segment of the sermon. Broadus claims, "Historical imagination, in reproducing the past, is one of the most powerful allies of preaching."⁵⁸ One sees an example of this historical reproduction in Acts 7:1–48, where Stephen provides a vivid description of the Old Testament covenant history from Abraham to Solomon. Wayne McDill, in *The 12 Essential Skills for Great Preaching*, dedicates an entire chapter to "deal with the preacher's skill at vividly and imaginatively portraying biblical and contemporary scenes and stories."⁵⁹ Clearly, the preacher's imagination can play a significant role in the explanation of the biblical setting and meaning of the text to a congregation. McDill also recognizes the importance of imagination to the learning process.⁶⁰ Merely passing the research from the preacher's exegesis to the congregation will not leave a lasting impact. But if the preacher employs his imagination to paint pictures of the biblical settings, characters, and events, he will have a more probable hope of listener retention regarding the contextual situation. Some may be concerned that adding imaginative details to biblical explanation may distort the author's original intent. But McDill

disagrees. He writes, "Some preachers may be reluctant to tell biblical stories with such realism. It may seem to be adding to Scripture to tell more than is there. There is no violation of the sacredness of Scripture to retell its stories imaginatively. It may be a violation of biblical intent to tell them in such a way that nobody can believe them."⁶¹ Therefore, the implementation of imagination in the explanation phase of the sermon is helpful and needful.

The most obvious sermon segment for the implementation of imagination is in the use of illustrations. McDill addresses this segment, writing, "Beyond appealing to intellect, you will appeal with illustration to the imagination."⁶² Illustration serves to take the idea from the text previously explained and express it as an analogous picture in the listener's mind.⁶³ The preacher cannot use abstract or fuzzy concepts when seeking to connect the dots between illustration and explanation. Instead, as Scott Pace recognizes, "In order for illustrations to be visually effective, we must . . . use specific and sensate language that enables our hearers to visualize the images."⁶⁴ In *Engaging Exposition*, Akin, Curtis, and Rummage require illustrations be "colorful and compelling, capturing the heart and imagination of the listener."⁶⁵ Jesus, the Master Teacher, uses numerous illustrations in his first public discourse (Matt. 5–7). Illustrating offers an easy and appropriate venue for implementing imagination into the preaching moment.

Application also demands the use of imagination in expository sermon construction. Adrian Lane finds a correlation between application and creativity from the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and apostles in content and form.⁶⁶ Despite his concerns regarding imagination, he admits, "Application requires creativity and courage: creativity to imagine the battles of daily life fought with the truths of God, and courage to talk about this reality on a personal level."⁶⁷ He also recognizes the requirement of involving the imaginations of the congregation in order to arouse interest.⁶⁸ McDill agrees with this assessment, placing the burden of application on the "thinking of the

preacher.”⁶⁹ He suggests preachers visualize, through use of the imagination, a picture of a person applying the sermon’s main point.⁷⁰ In *Why Johnny Can’t Preach*, the author states, “Fill their minds and imaginations with a vision of the loveliness and perfection of Christ in his person, and the flock will long to be like him.”⁷¹ Because the conclusion of an expository sermon shares the need for implementation of imagination in the same way that the introduction and application sections do, the reasons will not be repeated. Based on the above, the preacher should involve his imagination in every aspect of crafting an expository sermon.

PRACTICAL TIPS TO IMPROVE THE PREACHER’S IMAGINATION

Because of the essential nature of imagination to expository sermon construction, it behooves a preacher to improve his imaginative capacities. Paul Bull concurs, writing, “A preacher has much need to train and educate the powers of imagination, for there in the heavenly places, where an idea forms into an image, is the home of the real.”⁷² Fortunately, there are several methods for improving the preacher’s imagination for expository sermon construction. In this section, the following practical tips will be offered: prayer for the Holy Spirit’s illumination, intentional thinking, observation, reading, and writing.

The first and most vital step the preacher can take to improve his imaginative capacities is to pray for the Holy Spirit’s illumination. As Jeffrey Arthurs points out, “[T]he Holy Spirit illumines us to see what we are looking at in the text.”⁷³ They can pray that the Holy Spirit will fill them with wisdom, vision, and illumination, so they can picturize the original author’s meaning and communicate it into the listener’s imagination. Imagination under the direction of the Holy Spirit is likely what the authors of *Power in the Pulpit* meant by “sanctified imagination.”⁷⁴ Preachers who fail to submit their minds to the Spirit’s control risk using imagination without the appropriate safeguards

discussed previously. Therefore, the preacher's imagination can grow through the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit through prayer.

A preacher can also grow his imagination through the discipline of intentional thought. Spurgeon strongly advocates intentional thinking. In *Lectures to My Students*, he asserts:

Thinking is better than possessing books. Thinking is an exercise of the soul which both develops its powers and educates them. Without thinking, reading cannot benefit the mind, but it may delude the man into the idea that he is growing wise. Thought is the backbone of study, and if more ministers would think, what a blessing it would be!⁷⁵

Spurgeon recognizes that thinking is an exercise or, more accurately, a discipline. Bull agrees with this recommendation, as he applauds meditation as a "good method" to train and discipline the imagination.⁷⁶ William Evans advises preachers to reflect, or think, prior to constructing the sermon. He writes, "Reflect before beginning to write a single word of the sermon. And in reflecting one must value his own thought."⁷⁷ Thinking requires planning and commitment. Because of the busyness of ministry, preachers may surrender their thinking time for the practical aspects of ministry, leading to dull, boring presentations of research in the sermon. But for those preachers who want to craft persuasive and fresh expository sermons, setting aside time to intentionally think and meditate will grow their imaginative capacities.

Another important step a preacher can take to grow his imagination is through observation. Spurgeon instructs his students to be observant. He writes, "[M]uch that a minister needs to know he must learn by actual observation."⁷⁸ He tells them to "keep your eyes open; and gather flowers from the garden and the field with your hands."⁷⁹ Several other homileticians advise observation of nature. Broadus instructs readers to study nature.⁸⁰ Henry Ward Beecher says, "A man's

study should be everywhere, in the house, in the street, in the fields, and in the busy haunts of men."⁸¹ If a preacher is observant of the details of ordinary life, he will possess a rich source of imagery to employ in his imaginative endeavors. Webb Garrison states, "Preaching material is everywhere. In order to find and use it only two things are necessary: seeing eyes and a nimble imagination. Like writers and artists, you should cultivate the habit of frequently looking at the ordinary aspects of life through the eyes of a stranger."⁸² Author David Christensen affirms the practice of observing people to better understand their longings.⁸³ When observing, the preacher peppers the object or scene with questions, seeking to exhaust his mind of every possible point of interrogation. Simon Blocker writes, "Such persistent inquiry makes for open mental eyes, develops power to think, to study, to estimate, to decide."⁸⁴ Through consistent observation, the preacher's imagination will grow into a collection of images readily available for sermon construction.

The preacher can expand his imagination through the discipline of reading. Preachers might take this suggestion to mean reading the Bible more or devouring other spiritual sources. But Broadus brings a different viewpoint. He recommends, "Study imaginative literature (drama, poetry, fiction) in order to learn not only what people of imagination are able to see, but where they see it and how they portray their vision in vivid scenes and gripping imagery."⁸⁵ In other words, preachers who want to increase imaginative capacity must read widely. William Evans concurs, recommending that preachers read "suggestive books" for inspiration and adaptation.⁸⁶ Not only does John Booth agree with Broadus and Evans about reading fictional literature, but he also recommends reading sermons from other imaginative preachers. He says, "For ten cents a copy printed sermons may be secured from the majority of the nation's pulpit figures. Here are unparalleled opportunities to study first class models of effective oral speech. Read one or two of these just before sitting down to produce your own sermon."⁸⁷ While getting a physical copy of sermon

manuscripts costs more than ten cents a copy today, the internet provides countless sermons of great preachers of the past at no charge. The preacher has no good reason why he cannot read sermons from imaginative preachers. By making time for reading, the preacher will expand his imagination.

The final practical tip for improving the preacher's imagination is writing. Writing is laborious. It takes time to think and time to scribble marks on a page. Some preachers may argue that they do not even have time to draft a sermon manuscript, let alone write about things beyond the sermon. But writing serves to crystalize the imaginative process. John Booth states, "By conscious thought during the writing process the preacher can train his imagination to range, in lightning flashes, through the world's storehouse and pick out fitting analogies and suggestive pictures."⁸⁸ The preacher can note observations in a journal, write from preplanned prompts, or just write freely about anything. Any writing done consistently will build the imagination muscle. William Evans suggests the preacher carry a notebook with him wherever he goes, notating observations and sounds. He challenges preachers to "not allow one day to pass without making some record, no matter how small, of something you have observed."⁸⁹ When it comes to sermon construction, Wayne McDill advises preachers to write out immediate observations, possible subjects and complements, and a profile of the listener.⁹⁰ While writing, as well as the other practical tips, requires time and effort, the preacher will reap the rewards of a growing imagination available to implement in his expository sermon construction.

CONCLUSION

The preacher's imagination, therefore, plays an essential role in expository sermon construction. While potential dangers lurk in the imaginative realm, the preacher can ensure effective and proper use of imagination by staying within the confines of the text and relying on the Holy Spirit's filling. The Bible commends

and demonstrates the use of imagination in preaching through Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the apostles. Each aspect of sermon construction should be touched by the preacher's creativity. In that way, listeners' interest in the sermon will be gained and maintained. Improving the imagination takes commitment and discipline, but this paper provides practical tips to assist the preacher in this area. One can imagine how lively and interesting the sermon can become when the imagination is exercised throughout the sermon's structure.

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