

## **Why to Illustrate**

Let us begin by reviewing. Three stages of preparing explanation are observation, interrogation, and restatement. In preparing the explanation, those are stages that we typically go through. Observation says what is here. Interrogation says what it means. Restatement is how you can best communicate it. That is somewhat different from the three stages of presenting explanation in a typical main point. As you actually present that material, you state, place, and prove. Hopefully you have started to hear pastors do this. Usually the placement gets forgotten. We state a truth and then we begin explaining things out of a text or our doctrinal background, but we do not show the listener where it is in the text. State, place, prove is the presentation pattern that is very familiar. We have said this several times before, but you owe no more to explanation than what is necessary to make the point clear. And you owe no less to explanation than what is necessary to prove the point. That is where pastoral prudence takes over again. It might be clear, but you need to make sure you have proven your point. You may still need to prove it. But if you have proven it and it is clear, then move on. Typically we take the easiest course rather than the most difficult course in the proof category. Let us pray before we move forward.

*Heavenly Father, we, on this day, remember that righteousness exalts a nation. We remember that those who turn their eyes to You are those who are led to their security. So we as a people, Father, continue to pray for Your will to rule, that those who are in authority over us would be those who rule with justice and biblical righteousness. We pray, Father, that if there are those who are, by Your will, ruling over us with whom we disagree that nonetheless we would count the privileges of being a people who can elect their leaders. Even if we cannot elect our leaders, we are still the people of God who believe that You sit on Your throne and rule over the affairs of people so that Your will is done. May we be the people who trust Your way. Grant us to see eternally, Father, what You are doing. It is a plan beyond our own, a hand beyond our own, and a God who rules for the purposes of Jesus Christ. We pray, Father, knowing that sometimes the Word is spread in times of persecution better than it is in times of ease. We do not know what the day holds tomorrow, but we know that You know. In that we take great confidence. We ask, Father, for You to give us the faith that is necessary to be the citizens and the people of God that You require for Christ's glory. We make this prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.*

We will talk about illustration in this lesson. Let us return to our sermon skeleton and think of the taxonomy of where we are. We looked at the introductory material into the body of the sermon. So far we have the Scripture introduction, the Scripture reading, the introduction itself, and the proposition. Then as we begin thinking about main points, we recognize they have their own skeletal structure. There is explanation, illustration, and application in this double helix form you now know very well. The explanation has its own structure. Typically if it is longer than a paragraph it has subpoints. As always is the case, by doing subpoints and conclusions you learn far more about them. When you work on subpoints and conclusions for the first time, you almost always make mistakes. One reason is because not just the statements of main points are parallel but also the answers to the questions are worded in parallel. It is a common mistake to not put your answers in parallel. Often times the things you remember best later are those that you messed up the first time. If you made a mistake on parallel subpoint statements you probably will not do it again! You will say, "Three times I was told that the answers are to be parallel." We place such an emphasis on this because the subpoint statements have key terms in them. Everything is worded in parallel, but something changes that draws the attention of the ear. The explanation is about the keyword changes. The illustration is also about the keyword changes. If you do not have subpoints worded in parallel, you do not have the tools to form the illustration. After all, the illustration illustrates the point. If the subpoints hold the main conceptual point and they do not have keywords, we do not know what the illustration is going to be about. The necessity of subpoints

worded in parallel statements is so that you will have the key terms. The ear pays attention and understands what you are talking about by the keyword changes. You automatically know that is what the illustration is going to be about. Your key terms of the subpoints give you the raw material that will be necessary to form the illustration.

In the history of preaching, almost every component of exposition is debated at times. The Huguenots did not like explanation. Many in Reformed circles do not like illustration. We know there are people who think it panders to the ignorant that we have to use illustrations. There are some, for good theological reasons, who think we should not have application. The *sola spiritus* people think that it should be the Spirit alone; you should not do application. I will try, in the first part of this lesson today, to give you some of the reasons why we do illustration. Why in the history of preaching has great preaching always included illustration?

I can remember when I was a student and we had academic lecturers who came here. I was invited to the president's residence after the academic lectures to meet and talk to the man who had lectured to us. I can still remember this Dutch man sitting in the breezeway smoking his cigar. As he blew the smoke into the air and the circles moved away, he was actually complaining. He talked about the state of preaching. He said, "You know, television has ruined us all. I will use illustrations, but how I hate it! Little tales for little minds." Being a student and very academically oriented, I nodded my head. That is right! Is it not a shame the way that television has ruined us all and we have to use illustrations?

At that time I was also pastoring a little church in the cornfields of Illinois. To my horror now, I remember some of what I did. Sometimes when I preached I would actually take my systematic theology notes into the pulpit with me. I would actually preach right out of my class lecture notes and think I was giving the people good, solid information. It probably was good, solid information. I can remember one particular time in which I preached out of Philippians 2. The key phrase there is where Christ emptied Himself. The word there is *kenoo*, and theologians throughout the centuries have made the point that when Christ emptied Himself of heavenly glory He still remained divine. That word "emptying" does not mean "giving away." It means "putting away" without in any way taking away the authority of Christ's glory. I can remember standing at the pulpit, banging away, and saying to these farm and miner folk, "The word is *kenoo*! *Kenoo*, the word is! It means that He is still God even though He put aside His glory." I am sure they said amen. A few weeks later I had a missionary come whose name was Paul London. Paul had been a missionary to Africa for many years before his wife's health brought him to New York City. In New York he still ministered to international Africans in the United States, but he had a lot of African experience. When he came and ministered to our church, he asked the congregation to turn to Philippians 2. I thought, "Oh no! I just did this two weeks ago. They are going to be so bored because I already explained it to them." As Paul London went through that *kenoo* passage, he said to the people,

The way I like to think about this is in this way: when my wife, Carolyn, and I were in Africa, we ministered in a part of Africa that was very, very dry. It was almost a desert region. People would dig wells, but they are not the kind of wells that you think about where you lower a bucket into a well. Actually they sink deep shafts into the ground. The water actually condenses on the sidewalls and seeps in in very small amounts. They do not put a bucket down there, but they send people down into the well to wipe the walls and sop up the floor with rags. Then they squeeze the water into buckets. You have to go down into the well. The way that they do that is these well shafts are very narrow, so they put slits on the sides and a man walks down into the well to get the water. One day in our village there was a man who went down into the well, but he only got a little way down and then fell. He broke his leg at the bottom of the well. Somebody

had to go down and get him. He was a big man though, and nobody was able to go get him. Nobody wanted to go down and help him out until the chief came. The chief at that time was the largest and strongest man in the tribe. He took off his robe and his headdress, and he put them aside and went down into the well. He picked up the other man and brought him back up. Now folks, I have a question for you: when the chief took off his headdress and his robe, did he stop being the chief? No, he did not. That is what Jesus did. He took of His heavenly glory, but He did not stop being divine.

At the end of the service I stood beside Paul London as the people left, and they shook his hand and mine. I can still remember them saying, “Why, Reverend London, that was the most wonderful sermon. I never understood that passage until today!” I thought to myself, “It is not just little tales for little minds. Even I understood it better. I understood it better!”

Something deeper than just clarification goes on in illustrations. Illustrations rightly used do something fundamental in uniting the intellect with experience so that our very will is affected according to the Word of God. The reason that good preachers in all times have used illustration is not so that they will just have little tales for little minds. It is not just so they will entertain or spoon-feed the ignorant. They know something more fundamental is going on, that when experience is hooked to the intellect, profound understanding occurs in a way that mere logical explanation falls short. As you think about illustrations, do not be concerned about all of the details of this lesson. Just catch the gist of it. When we get to the next lesson, I will really push you on the details.

Let us talk about why we illustrate. Why do we do this in the history of preaching and in our preaching today? Before we go into the reasons why, let us talk about why not. I want to cut off at the pass what I recognize to be legitimate objections.

Illustrations should not be used simply as a form of entertainment. We should not illustrate just to entertain. Some time ago we talked about that chart of what speech communicators call Sways-ability or persuasion. When speakers begin their speech with an anecdote just to humor us, we know that interest goes up very rapidly. Credibility goes down almost as rapidly, though. This happens particularly if it is not apparent that the story or anecdote related to the concept at hand. Sways-ability, or persuasion, falls if all we do is entertain and if people know that is all we do. The very thing we think we accomplish by taking people along with us so that we will be more persuasive actually backfires, and the opposite thing occurs. All we do is entertain. It is not just that our persuasion falls. The effect of the preaching itself is damaged. If people begin to think that good preaching is preaching that entertains, think what shallow expectations we have created. “If it is not entertaining, it is not good. If I do not find it funny, then it is not valuable.” Talk about miscommunicating what the Word of God is about. If the goal of our illustration is to entertain, we have seriously damaged ourselves, the Word of God, and the people who listen to it.

Second, illustrations should not be used simply to spoon-feed the ignorant. That is the condescending notion that they are too dumb to understand, so you have to illustrate. People are not too dumb to understand; they are just as smart as we are. They do not have our seminary lingo down, but they are just as smart as we are. We do not illustrate in order to dumb down a message. Something else needs to be going on. I do not illustrate because they are too dumb to understand, and neither do I illustrate because I am too dumb to do good explanation. Sometimes you might think, “I cannot explain this very well. My explanation is not logical or weighty enough. I will throw in an illustration because I cannot explain very well.” If you cannot explain something very well, the illustration will not help you. This is because the primary purpose of illustration is not to clarify. The primary purpose of illustration is to motivate. The

illustration can clarify, but that is not the primary purpose. Otherwise you will think, “That was very clear, therefore I do not need to illustrate.” It is actually the opposite. Once it is very clear, you still need illustration because the primary purpose of illustration is not to clarify but to motivate.

Some of you have had teacher training, and you know these different distinctions. When we do explanation, we primarily deal with the intellect. When I do explanation, I primarily deal with information that you need. This is so that the intellect can properly process information out of the text. My goal is not just to inform the intellect, though. My goal is to transform the will: application. I have explanation, and I move toward application, which is to transform the will. Between will and intellect is effect. The combination of intellect and my experience with that that needs change is effect. The effect is what illustration deals with. I try to point toward what transformation is needed, but I want to bring into experience that aspect of understanding that explanation has dealt with. Explanation deals with intellect, application deals with the will, and illustration deals with effect. Effect is the motivation factor that brings this truth to that aspect of life that the will addresses. That takes us to why we actually use illustration.

The first reason we use illustration is because of the way that we live and interact in our world. It has been said by many people that we live in the age of visual literacy. We are habituated to picture thinking. Consider some of the following statistics of what that means. Obviously these can be debated in different terms, but you will get the idea. The average adult parishioner, the average person whom you will talk to on a Sunday morning, will spend roughly 50 hours a year in church. They will spend 2000 hours a year in front of a television. People will debate that because they say that is the time the television is on in the home. It does not necessarily mean people watch it that much. It is almost visual wallpaper in many homes. It is just on all the time. It causes a habituation to picture thinking. It gets scarier when you think of young generations that are now coming up. The average high school graduate will have watched 15,000 hours of television at a minimum, but will only have spent 12,000 hours in school. So the average high school kid will spend more hours watching television than in school. By the time he graduates high school, he will only have spent 1100 hours in church. He spends 1100 hours in church, 12,000 hours in class, and over 15,000 hours watching television. He will have watched 350,000 commercials. Here is the one that scares me the most: the average preschooler in the United States will have watched more television before entering the first grade than she will have listened to her father in her lifetime. We are deeply affected by the pop culture around us. Even if we personally think we are not, there is no question the people to whom we speak are deeply and profoundly affected by the age in which we live. Then you might ask, “Are you saying that because we are habituated to picture thinking we are just going to capitulate to our culture? Is that what you are talking about? Are we to entertain because we are supposed to capitulate to the vices of the present culture?” Even though we talk about the way we live, I want you to think about the way of wonderful preachers in the past.

If you think about those who have preached in previous generations, I will ultimately contend that the reason we use illustrations is not just because of this age but because of the way the mind functions in every age. Think of this: in the Middle Ages, there was a group of documents that circulated among the monasteries. It was known as the *ars praedicandi*, the art of preaching. It was not *Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* by John Broadus; it was not *Christ-Centered Preaching* or *Biblical Preaching* by Haddon Robinson. It was the *ars praedicandi*, which was the curriculum for preaching that circulated in the Middle Ages among the monasteries. Among the *ars praedicandi* were the documents known as the *exempla*. These were books of illustrations. It was not just White’s *10,000 Illustrations for Preachers Today* or Barnhouse’s *Illustrations* that you can get over in the library, but this goes as far back as the Middle Ages. In a pre-electronic media age, people who were preaching still collected illustrations and used them as fundamental to what preaching was in those days. This is true of good preaching in any

age. For instance, the most memorable sermon of Jonathan Edwards is “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” and the portion of the sermon that you remember is the spiders over the flame. Is it not interesting that Jonathan Edwards was not on the radio or television, yet he used profound illustrations on the American frontier that we still remember to this day? If you go all the way back to Christendom, the earliest preacher whom we are aware of, Golden Tongue or Golden Mouth, you will recognize that he was powerful in his use of illustrations. There is something more fundamental than pop culture going on in the way that we understand. Remember we said, “Intellect, affect, transform the will.” There is something that has to hook the will to the intellect. That typically, in the history of preaching, has been the use of illustration. Charles Spurgeon used illustrations, and he wrote a whole book on the use of illustrations. He was also in the pre-electronic era. The Westminster Divines, in the Directory for Public Worship, said illustrations that “delight the heart of the hearer” should be included in our sermons. Even the Westminster Divines, who were before media and before the age of the habituated-to-picture thinking, still talked about the use of illustration. That is because it is an old, old preacher’s rubric that the goal of the preacher is to turn the ear into the eye. I want to visualize what you talk about. It is really more than that: I want to experience what you talk about. The best preachers have always recognized that if they have only given you head knowledge, heart knowledge is still a long way away. So part of effective preaching is getting the listeners to experience what I talk about.

The reason for the effectiveness of illustrations has been discerned in more recent decades by the way that we learn. Most of you who have been in teacher training or education in recent years recognize that there is a revolution that is occurring in this country and throughout the Western world in understanding how we learn and incorporate information. Up until the twentieth century, the Cartesian Model ruled. “I think, therefore I am.” The intellect is the foundation of knowing. Then you had the French philosophers, people like Merleau-Ponty, who said, “I am, therefore I think.” They actually said, “I can.” I can be involved or experience something, and as a result of going through it I can actually think about it. If I have not gone through something, I cannot really think about it yet. You can recognize that this is a dangerous philosophy. Talk about subjectivism: if I do not go through it, it is not real. There is damage in that. Yet it rules much of the way in which education is going these days. We should recognize the danger of this kind of radical subjectivism. “If I do not experience it, it is not real.” At the same time there is power in saying, “When I experience something, I understand more.”

You have probably heard of Dale’s Cone of Experience, which came out of a study at Michigan State University. “We will retain 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see, and 60% of what we do.” In some ways, that is true. If you read something and have not had any other action with it, do you retain less of it? Instinctively we say that it is not as powerful as if I read it and experienced it. In a weird way, that is what happens when you work on subpoints and conclusions for the first time. I want to tell you how profoundly this has affected your education experience and mine. Mine was the first generation in public schooling that decided it would go on “field trips.” Your grandparents did not go on field trips in their education. All this stuff from Michigan State University, Dale’s Cone of Experience, and the philosophers of the French schools who came to the United States, influenced us. They said that kids had to interact with what they were learning. You cannot just tell them about firefighters; you should take them to a fire station. Do not just tell them how bread is baked; take them to a bakery. A lot of you remember those field trips a lot more than you remember things you learned in the classroom. Instinctively you know that interaction somehow drives knowledge deeper. You also know, because of the generation that you are in, that people learn differently. It is the reason we are a little suspect of the notion that everybody needs to learn by experience. The late-night television will tell you, “Come to our truck driving school, and you will get hands-on experience.” At the same time you may be wondering if that is the only way people learn. Intuitively you know it is the only way some people learn. We will be talking to all kinds of people. One of the wonderful things that has happened

generationally through educational transfers is that almost everyone has become more understanding of different learning styles. We recognize that some of us learn very easily as linear thinkers: just read it, and you get it. We also know that some people have to have some hands-on experience. Some need to hear us say it rather than read it on their own. Some need to do an exercise in order to understand it more than if they had just read it. Preaching tries to reach all of these different people and learning styles. It uses the different tools that the history of preaching provides. It really is the way of giants of the past and the way we learn today.

Illustration is also the way we motivate. If my child says to me, “Dad, why should I save money?” I will tell him that at some point he will want to get a Christmas present for his mom and he will need some money to buy her something. In telling him that, I do not go into an economic lesson on the nature of savings and interest income accrual. Instead I tell him a story. I tried to motivate my child by pointing out the implications of his actions. I explain a principle by telling about an experience he will have as a consequence of involving or not involving that principle in his life.

Let me share some good illustrations to show how we feel the weight of illustration. The first is from a sermon that underscored the importance of every child of God having a role in God’s kingdom. That is the principle: every child of God has a role in God’s kingdom. I can state that as a principle, “No matter who you are, you have a role. Even if you think you are insignificant or just a child, you have a role in God’s kingdom.” But I want you to think of this illustration, not only in terms of what knowledge it communicates, but also in terms of what it does to the will at the same time. Think of this not just as clarification but also as motivation. Think of what the preacher does. As a reminder, the principle is that every child of God has a role in God’s kingdom.

Rising out of the swamps just north of Savannah, Georgia is an historic church named Jerusalem. Salzburg Lutherans built this church in the eighteenth century after being expelled from their Catholic homeland. General Oglethorpe offered free land to these Lutherans who would assume the role of screening Savannah from hostile Indians all around. The Salzburgers from Austria brought their faith to this new-found land and named their town New Ebenezer. The name harkened back to biblical images more solid than the bogs surrounding the town. The dangers of the land and the diseases of the swamp soon decimated these early Lutheran settlers. But no trial could deter them from setting up their community of faith. The few able-bodied men continued to climb scaffolds to hoist bricks up to form the massive walls of their church. Women molded and baked sandy clay. Children carried the materials, both to the women on the ground and the men on the scaffolds. To this day, if you go to New Ebenezer, you will see imbedded in the brick of the church the fingerprints of children. When you picture in your mind those little children transporting bricks to those sick or dying parents, your heart may still break. But I imagine those children would rather your heart soar. For the print of each child is a poignant reminder that God can even use little ones for His work as they endure in His purposes.

Ebenezer means “stone of my help.” They raised this town out of a swamp, and they called it “Rock of my help.” The preacher wanted to make his principle memorable. He could have just said, “Kids have a role in the kingdom.” But he did not just want you to feel the information; he wanted you to feel the impact of it on experience. Heart, mind, body, and all aspects of us are involved that way. The role of illustration is not just to clarify; it is supremely to motivate. It brings intellect to the will by dealing with effect. It is the way we motivate.

Beyond the way we motivate, illustrations are the way that Scripture teaches. There are accounts of people experiencing the truths of God. About 75% of the Bible is historical narrative. That is an amazing

teaching principle! We cannot say that stories do not have a place in teaching God's people. Seventy-five percent is not little tales for little minds. It is not just the composition of the Old Testament or the New that uses illustrations. Redemptive history unfolds through story, too, though there is a lot of law and proposition included. We typically think of redemptive history as the garden, the flood, Jacob's ladder, the Patriarchs, the kingship of David and the following kings, and Christ on the cross. These major images that signal the epos of biblical history also make up the flow of biblical truth. It could have just been a systematics manual. Do you ever get frustrated with God? "Why is it not just a systematics book, God? That would have been so much better. Why did you not just put it down as a book of doctrine?" The Bible is the way it is because of the genius of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit recognizes that if it had just been propositional statements, those propositions would change with the experience of subsequent people. We will always interpret propositions out of our experience. The Bible gives propositions, and it gives the experience of God's people in that proposition. That way the experience explains the proposition even as the proposition explains the experience. They lock each other down. It becomes transcendent truth because it is not governed by my experience of the proposition. It is governed by my seeing the experience of God's people. I live it through their experience, so now I know what the proposition means. I know what it means when God says, "You shall have no other gods before me." I see the people of Israel over and over again turning to other gods, and I see the consequence of that. I understand the proposition by living through in described detail the experience of the people of Israel. The experience locks down the meaning of the proposition. It further explains it and motivates us to do what the proposition says. The proposition is necessary.

That is where the modern philosophy is wrong. It says, "If I do not experience it, it is not true." The Bible says it is true, and here is the experience of God's people who show you and prove that truth. "Therefore there is no temptation taking you but such as is common." You now know this truth because of the experience of people like you. The more I studied modern hermeneutics, the more I thought, "God is really, really smart in the way that He put the Bible together!" On our own, we would have just put together a book of doctrine. We would have made a systematic theology book and not recognized that it would actually have lost people over time. Having the story with the proposition is what actually locks down meaning.

This is the way that Jesus speaks. There is a cartoon where a man echoes a lot of concerns about preaching. As he listens to a preacher preaching he says, "In my opinion, he needs to use fewer parables and more Scripture!" You may have heard that complaint before, and it may be valid sometimes. There is almost an evangelical instinct that if it is all story, we object because we feel that entertainment rather than preaching is going on. These are known as skyscraper sermons, which have a story on a story on a story.... You just want to keep me engaged so you just keep telling stories. This is more your concern for how you do as a public speaker than it is for communicating the truth of God. At the same time, we object to arrogance that says I will never connect this biblical information with your life. We have to "earth" heaven at times. That is always the goal of the preacher: to bring heaven and earth together. One of the things that happens in illustrations is we take the experience that people have and say how it relates. It says in Mark 4, "Without a parable, Jesus did not say anything to them." That is a remarkable pun if you think about it both ways. It could just mean that, without a parable, He did not say anything else. We keep proposition linked to parable. But in educational theory, it has another meaning. Without a parable, nothing was communicated; it did not come across. At the same time, Jesus used parable to keep things from coming across. Without a parable, He did not say anything to them, but when they were in private, He then explained it. This is biblical genius coming through. If it is just story without proposition, it also does not have meaning. If it is just proposition without story, it does not have transcendent meaning. What makes it have meaning is proposition that is transcendent and experience that links it to our world. As a result, transcendent truth comes into our world and has meaning for us as

the Scriptures intended.

One of the remarkable places that this is said is in the Gospel of John and the epistle of John as well. Merleau-Ponty, the various French philosophers, and most teacher education programs in this country in recent years have said that stories have power to engage people. But the way they work is with what is called “lived body detail.” It is as though I lived through the experience again in my body. That is what makes the effect occur. My mind and the abstract propositions are now lived through as though my body were in the experience of those propositions. That might be great abstract truth, but listen to how the apostle John uses it. This is what he says in John 1:14 and 18, “The glory of God who cannot be seen was revealed in the Son who made known the glory of the father [by bringing it out in narrative] by the way he lived among us.” This is aorist middle indicative of *exegeomai*, which some of you read A. T. Robertson to mean “to bring out in narrative.” That is an interesting concept. He brings it out in narrative by the way He lived among us. John says in his epistle, “That which was from the beginning [the Son removed from us], which we have now heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and our hands have handled of the word of life—for the life was manifested, and we have seen it and bear witness and show unto you that eternal which was with the Father and manifested unto us—that which we have seen and heard we declare unto you so that you may have fellowship with us because our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” There is the glory of the Father, which is revealed in the Son. We know that glory of the Father because the Son lived among us in narratives in our lives. And the way that you know it is because we will communicate to you what we have seen, heard, and handled. Do you hear “lived body detail”? What we have seen, heard, and handled is the glory of the Son, which is of the Father. We have had fellowship with it. The way in which you will have fellowship with it is by us telling you what we have seen, heard, and handled.

The lived body detail communicated is what is ultimately going to communicate the abstract to our experience. A famous study done in the 1970s by a pair of researchers recognized the power of experience and began to ask how learning could occur when everybody could not have the same experience. Not everyone could go on field trips to the same place. They began to test something. They did not just have someone go through an experience, but they had that person fully describe that experience. They wanted to know how much of the experience could be known by the listener. Surprisingly, there was not a testable difference between what people actually experienced and an experience that was communicated to them as long as the experience was fully described. “Testable difference” is an interesting qualification because I still say that if you actually go through a scuba dive it is a little different than someone describing it to you fully. In terms of a “testable difference,” they said there is no testable difference between an experience that is lived through and one that is fully described. “That which we have seen, heard, and handled, we tell you about so that you will know the glory of the Father revealed in the Son.” Lived body detail.