PowerPoint in Preaching? No!

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Here's the scene. The lights are off in the sanctuary. This is necessary better to see what's on the projection screen that has been set up just inside the altar railing. The screen is full, jam-packed with words. In silhouette, one can see the outline of the "preacher" with his back to the congregation. And he is reading. Reading everything that is on the screen. He could read it off the laptop that stands on a small table that also holds the digital projector. But he likes looking at the screen.

This is preaching?

Does PowerPoint have a place in preaching? With a few rare and wonderful exceptions, which I do not have time to expand on here, the answer is no.

PowerPoint is a brand name that has now reached iconic status, similar to Band-Aid and Kleenex. The program was created in the late '80s by a small software firm named Forethought, which was part of the Apple-Mac sphere of influence. The initial purpose of the program—and this is important—was to create transparencies that could be used on overhead projectors. Eventually, digital projectors took the place of the overhead projector. And also, eventually, Microsoft bought out Forethought, and PowerPoint became part of the collection of programs known as the Microsoft Office Suite. It is still possible to print out transparencies for overhead projectors if you are into that kind of thing.

Before I go further, there is one other thing to disclose: I use PowerPoint all the time. I use it for classroom lectures and Sunday adult forums. That includes using the animation features, the various backgrounds, and so forth. Best of all is the ability to use maps and pictures. I have not used it, however, for preaching.

There are fundamental problems in using PowerPoint in preaching. First, it is just a fancy version of the slide projector, the opaque projector, the overhead projector, and the once-popular filmstrip projector. A question for the preacher who is using or contemplating using PowerPoint is whether she has been using the slide projector or the overhead. If not, why start using PowerPoint? Does it really enhance communication? Or is it just a new toy?

The second problem was identified by Lord Acton in the nineteenth century:

PowerPoint in Preaching? Yes...but!

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Should I use PowerPoint (Microsoft) or Keynote (Mac) when preaching a sermon? My answer is a qualified yes. Yes, you should use PowerPoint or Keynote because, as you know, the world has changed. As hard as it might be for text-loving pastors and professors, the world no longer revolves around words, but images. This image fetish has its origins in the distinct and mutual influence of advertising and television in the middle of the twentieth century, and in the power of film. But from these origins the ongoing escalation of image-based communication has forcefully pushed out text as our common way of communication, resulting in such phenomena as the move away from newspapers and text-based websites toward video and image sites like Web 2.0. All this has signaled to people in our world that a picture is more powerful than words.

Daniel Pink in his 2006 best-seller *A Whole New Mind* articulated this by describing how we have moved from an "information age," in which text is the most proficient, to what he calls a "conceptual age," where "high-touch" concepts placed in image-based media play to our right brain (as opposed to our reason-based left brain). It appeals to "designers, inventors, teachers, storytellers—creative and empathetic right-brain thinkers whose abilities mark the fault line between who gets ahead and who doesn't [in this new age]."* This means that preaching must work to connect with people's right brain; it needs to be high-touch, if it seeks to relate. The use of slideware like PowerPoint and Keynote can assist you in moving your sermons in this direction. Of course it is true that you can preach a sermon that is high-touch and never use slideware: your storytelling ability may allow you to proclaim the word in a way that connects with people's right brain. But, for many of us, an image here and there can really help. And for younger people, images through slideware will more fully connect with how they experience the world.

But then here comes my *qualified* yes. Yes, you should use PowerPoint and Keynote, but not to communicate words. If you are simply going to fill slides with text, then you are better off passing out the outline to your sermon. In other words, if you are going to have nothing but bullet points, then do not use PowerPoint or

*Quoted in Garr Reynolds, *Presentation Zen* (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2008) 14.

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." The phrase can be modified to read: "PowerPoint corrupts."

The corrupting influence of PowerPoint has been pointed out by Edward R. Tufte, professor emeritus of statistics at Yale University. Tufte has written several books on the visual display of quantitative information. In his recent essay, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*, Tufte has argued that the templates of PowerPoint "weaken verbal and spatial reasoning."[1] The inner workings of PowerPoint want to make you conform to its way of thinking. PowerPoint wants the user, you, to think in bulleted lists, it wants titles for slides, it offers the user an array of colorful, eye-catching, and ultimately distracting backgrounds. Tufte has even argued that the Columbia space shuttle disaster might have been prevented had not engineers been reduced to using PowerPoint to try to communicate complex information to their superiors.[2]

A third problem: bells and whistles. These are the sirens of PowerPoint. Once you have clicked on "Slideshow" and gone to "Animation Schemes," the rest of the day is gone. Is it better to fade in or fade out, to swipe, or to checkerboard the transition from slide to slide? This all takes time and preparation. At this point the preacher has to ask, "Who is working for whom?" Maybe you want to insert a box with a video clip. That can be cool, or not. Maybe the sound in the sanctuary is bad, or, for some reason, what worked at home doesn't work on Sunday morning. The organist in a country church I served had the upright piano back to back with the console of the electric organ, the theory being that if the power failed, the service could move seamlessly from electric to unplugged. This strategy offered an odd comfort. The point is that bells and whistles look cool for the moment, but raise the vulnerability and dependency level of the sermon without significantly enhancing the message—and may, in fact, detract from it. My recommendation is to lash yourself to the mast and plug your ears with wax when the PowerPoint sirens start singing their songs about communicating with the Millennial Generation.

The final argument, however, is the most significant. Preaching is about the word, and PowerPoint is not. In using PowerPoint, or any display, the preacher is in competition with the image or the list. When given the option, the audience will look past the preacher to the image on the screen and will prefer looking over listening. This might be helpful for teaching or for presenting the law. Preaching is about persuasion, proclamation, and the good news. The person and the voice of the preacher are part of the mediation of the gospel. *Natura verbi est audiri*, the nature of the word is to be heard, said Luther. It was true then and it is true now. ⊕

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[1]Edward R. Tufte, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint: Pitching Out Corrupts Within* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2006). Tufte also has a website: www.edwardtufte.com.

[2]Clive Thompson, "2003: The 3rd Annual Year in Ideas; PowerPoint Makes You Dumb," in *The New York Times*, December 14, 2003. See also Dr. Peter Norvig's PowerPoint version of Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address": http://norvig.com/Gettysburg/. Norvig thanks the Autocontent Wizard of PowerPoint for its help.

Keynote. I would recommend never using a bullet point, and keeping words to less than six on each slide. Slideware is not a word processing program, but a multimedia tool. Use the tool to add image to your sermons, and let your words be the words. If you are using the slideware as your outline, or are at *any time* turning and referring to it, you have slipped into a left-brain presentation and have sacrificed the move toward the right brain, making the slideware distracting and in turn damaging your sermon.

Instead, write your sermon without having the slideware in mind at all. Write it faithful to the text and to the people that will hear it. Then, after the sermon is finished, read through it and think about what pictures would enhance and connect with your message—professional, high quality pictures, not lame clip art. Then create a few—no more than six to eight—slides that add image and image only to your message. During the sermon, never refer to the pictures; just allow them to be in the background to give conceptual texture to your words, to draw the listener deeper into his or her imagination. Don't *ever* make the image your message; allow the image to draw people through their right brain more deeply into your sermon. Slideware will never save a crappy sermon; it will only make a crappy sermon worse. Slideware can only strengthen an already well-written and studied sermon. After all, the software was created to enhance, not to *be*, your presentation.

Therefore, whenever you use PowerPoint or Keynote in a sermon, the rule is simplicity. It is not the thing: your sermon and the text it proclaims are the thing. With that in mind, go and use PowerPoint and Keynote. But use it carefully and wisely. ⊕

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