

Andrews University

Digital Commons @ Andrews University

Faculty Publications

11-1-1973

For Instance?

Steven P. Vitrano
Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs>



Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Vitrano, Steven P., "For Instance?" (1973). *Faculty Publications*. 3796.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/3796>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

the Local church elder

Preaching-4

"For Instance?"

Steven P. Vitrano

"WHAT you say is not quite clear. Could you illustrate?"

Have you ever said that? Did anyone ever say it to you?

We illustrate to clarify. In his book *The Art of Illustrating Sermons*, Ian Macpherson says: "To begin with their most obvious function, illustrations can help us to make our meaning plain. Clarity is a first essential in preaching, and word-paintings are of high value because they can assist us to be clear."—Page 13.

Illustrations are necessary for clarity in all manner of discourse, but in preaching the necessity is greater because, more often than not, the subject matter is abstract rather than concrete. Jesus recognized this when He taught in parables. His burden was to clarify for men the great truths of the kingdom of God. He talked about such things as truth, love, purity, holiness, and how men ought to live as children of God. In addition He talked about God, the Holy Spirit, heaven, hell, angels, and demons. All this He sought to clarify by using many illustrations and parables.

Macpherson suggests sixteen other functions a sermon illustration may fulfill in addition to that of making the meaning plain. He suggests that the illustration may:

1. Help persuade the audience.
2. Help the sermon come alive.
3. Help beautify the sermon.
4. Help give the sermon variety.
5. Help keep the sermon as short as possible.
6. Aid rhetorical repetition.

7. Bring a sermon down to earth.

8. Help preserve a proper balance in the divisions.

9. Make smoother transitions.

10. Appeal to all classes.

11. Help establish rapport.

12. Help "rest" the audience.

13. Help the memory.

14. Indirectly enforce a point.

15. Touch the heart.

16. Lead to conversion.

But for many a young preacher, including the church elder who does not claim to be a preacher, the use of illustrations in a sermon constitutes a major problem. The first question—the one most often asked is, Where can one find them; where do sermon illustrations come from?

It might help in answering this question to first consider the kinds of illustrations that may be used. One could look long and find nothing if he didn't know what he was looking for. W. E. Sangster, in his *The Craft of Sermon Illustration*, discusses the following kinds of illustrations: 1. Figures of speech; 2. Analogy; 3. Allegory; 4. Fable; 5. Parable; 6. Historical allusion; 7. Biographical incident; 8. Personal experience; 9. Anecdote.

The use of fables might be questioned since we believe in speaking only that which is true, and yet all of us can think of a nursery rhyme, or a famous fable we have heard in childhood that might illustrate a point in a sermon. One rule of thumb to follow, perhaps, is that the fable always be identified as such so that there is no chance of misunderstanding.

Illustrations may be found in many places. They may be found in what you read—books, magazines, and papers. Many will come from personal experience. Life is filled with lessons to be learned if only we are alert and aware and convinced that such is the case.

Books of illustrations have been published. Some are better than

others, but I have not found them too helpful. They are "canned" illustrations, and they sound like it unless used with great skill.

The ability to see sermon illustrations in everyday life is called the homiletic bias. If you live with a homiletic bias, you will see illustrations of great truths all about you—in the comment of a child, in the flight of a bird, in the miracle of electronic communications, in a discussion between friends, in reflection upon your own thoughts and reactions to life situations.

Sermons that I have heard or read have been among my best sources of sermon illustrations. I find it easier to use an illustration gleaned from this source because I have heard it or read it in context. I see how it is used to make the point.

Which brings us to the matter of making the point. An illustration is used to make a point. It is thus that it clarifies a truth. If the illustration makes no point or if it fails to make the point, it is confusing rather than clarifying, it is distracting rather than illuminating.

I will long remember the student who came to me one day filled with joy because he found a *great* sermon illustration a preacher had used in a sermon. The student related the story with much enthusiasm and quite a bit of effectiveness. My first reaction upon hearing the story was one of agreement. It was a *good* story. But then I asked the student a question, "What was the point of the story—what did it illustrate?" His countenance fell a bit and he looked at me wondering. He couldn't remember. The point had escaped him. Great story—but to what point? Sometimes the story can be so dramatic that it ceases to be a useful illustration.

Illustrations are used to make truth clear. Illustrations must illustrate. □