

[RESEARCH]

The Perils of PowerPoint Preaching

Research reveals that the use of PowerPoint slides during preaching is often more of a distraction than a transformative tool

BY LORI CARRELL

In an ongoing investigation of sermon communication and transformation, more than 5,000 listeners and 52 Protestant pastors are providing much needed feedback. Thirty-six percent of the 52 Protestant pastors included in this study spend precious sermon prep time polishing PowerPoint slides. Another whole group (32 percent) spends at least an hour each week searching the Internet for ready-made visual aids. Is this prep-time worth it? Does a sermon that uses PowerPoint graphics increase spiritual growth in listeners' lives?

The listeners' responses reveal that PowerPoint preaching does not make a difference—the most transformative sermons don't include projected visuals, and PowerPoint presentations are even viewed as a distraction by a majority of commenting listeners. "We look at the screen instead of listening to the pastor," say many. "It's a cover-up," said one listener. "Pastor can just read off his slides and so can we."

Ouch! If you've worked hard to incorporate PowerPoint into your preaching, please keep reading. Obviously, your intent wasn't to cover up or distract; your intent was to increase impact. So with that goal in mind, please prayerfully ponder these PowerPoint preaching distractions.

#1) DISTRACTING DELIVERY

Listeners describe pastors struggling to operate technology, glitches as routine rather than rare, and churches full of people staring at screens. ▶▶



preaching & worship

- **Tech trouble**—Equipment malfunction was the number one complaint of listeners, who perceive pastors to be preoccupied with PowerPoint presentations instead of preaching. If you don't have dependable equipment and trusty techies, then here's a bold suggestion: Don't even bother.

- **Distanced delivery**—This study reveals a strong link between listener life-change and a sermon delivery that authentically communicates relationship and emotion. PowerPoint usage often inadvertently diminishes eye contact, facial expression, and pastoral responsiveness, contributing to perceptions of relational distance. Pastors may be assuming that the trade-off is worth it, but many listeners disagree.

- **Substitute vs. supplement**—Sermon visuals shouldn't substitute for wonderful words but rather should supplement when words will not suffice. One listener calls Power-

Point a creativity crutch. Those who carefully craft compelling sermon visuals have the right to reject that label as unfair, but it may also be wise to ask: *Have I used language as vividly as possible? Does my storytelling maximize the power of narrative? Do my metaphors elegantly clarify complex concepts?* Excellence in language usage is related to transformative preaching, while the typical PowerPoint slide full of text is not.

#2) DISTRACTING CONTENT

Preachers and listeners agree that the goal of sermon communication is change. Can PowerPoint distract from sermon content that inspires transformation?

- **Text overload**—Many preachers over-use text on their PowerPoint slides rather than strategically using emotionally evocative graphics or photos to supplement their words. Masterful worship montages and stirring story videos

may move us, but projections of printed text displayed while a pastor talks don't create the same result.

- **Inclination to inform**—A majority of sermons with text-based PowerPoint slides don't have content with clearly articulated spiritual growth goals. The format of PowerPoint seems to support a pastor's inclination to be more informative than change-centered.

- **Bullet point thinking**—A habit of squeezing sermon content into bullet point mode can counter cognitive and affective processes needed for spiritual growth. To generate transformation, we need a public communication mode that moves us toward dialogue, toward improved reasoning and emotional processing, and toward the integration of our personal narrative into God's grand narrative. Bullet point thinking trivializes some sermon content, connoting simplistic solutions for complex spiritual issues.

#3) DISTRACTING ORGANIZATION

Listeners report that listening energy is hard to maintain when sermons aren't well-organized. Preachers perceive that PowerPoint templates keep them from rambling, but the listener perspective reveals another surprise.

- **Information overload**—If you think that listeners can process more information because you're using PowerPoint, think again. If your sub-points have sub-points and several supporting paragraphs, please know that the projection of all that text has created a sermon that is wide rather than deep.

- **Conceptual disconnection**—Heavy usage of PowerPoint can lead pastors to assume that the mere changing of slides provides a transition. Certainly listeners can see that a new slide has appeared, but without a verbal conceptual link to previous

ideas or to the central change goal, listeners can become lost.

- **Visual and verbal clash**—If your listeners are still staring at the screen when you think they should be focused on you and your words, consider your competition. As an Intro to a Sabbath sermon, one pastor projected a vacation beach shot of himself and left the slide up for the whole sermon. If you're done talking about an image, we should be done looking at it.

- **Teammate trouble**—The second most common complaint about PowerPoint presentations comes from talented techies. While such comment makers are sympathetic to your busy schedule, they're also frustrated with the erratic and short deadlines pastors provide. Coordination of the visuals for all service elements can contribute to sermon impact, so if you're delegating visual aid preparation, organize your sermon prep timeline appropriately.

If you're an overloaded pastor who's pursuing transformative preaching, please know that these research results are offered to serve you as you serve others. You must determine if the distractions of PowerPoint are present in your preaching. If you decide that preparing PowerPoint slides isn't a good use of your time, you may be wondering, what is? In the next issue of Rev1, we'll uncover the preparation processes that create sermons with lasting impact. ☞



LORI CARBELL, professor of communication at the University of Wisconsin, is currently conducting research on "Transformative Sermon Communication." The pastors participating in this study are enrolled in the Center for Excellence in Congregational Leadership, a Lilly Endowment endeavor at the Green Lake Conference Center. The 5,000+ listeners providing feedback attend their churches. (<http://cecl.glc.org>).