

THE CHRISTIAN TEACHER

by

Clarence H. Benson, Litt. D

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Illustration

WE HAVE already seen that the illustration is nothing more than a retreat to familiar ground, and as such, constitutes an important part of the law of apperception. The pupil can learn the new only in terms of the old, so that when the advance is more rapid than the mind can follow, the illustration is introduced as a temporary retirement to known scenes in order that the lagging understanding may catch up.

I. VALUE

The importance of illustrations in teaching cannot be overemphasized.

Popular preachers and platform speakers are usually masters of the art of illustrating, but few Sunday school teachers realize the value of illustrations sufficiently to cultivate skillful use of them. Since nothing new can be learned except in terms of the old, the teacher's work is not done when he has presented the facts of a lesson. If they are beyond the mental capacity of his pupils, little progress has been made. In fact, disorder and disinterest most frequently arise from a hazy understanding, which could quickly be clarified by an illustration.

It was not the remarkable voice he possessed or the depth of thought he expressed so much as his vivid illustrations that enabled Dr. Spurgeon to hold multitudes spellbound. This great preacher in his talk to teachers said:

“I am sure if I were a boy listening to some of you, unless you told me a tale now and then, you would as often see the back of my head as my face. I don't know if I sat in a hot schoolroom and you did not strive to interest me, but that my head would nod and I would go to sleep, or be playing with Tom on my left. So don't forget to give your pupils a few anecdotes. Wherever you go, if you are really a good teacher, you can always find something to make into a tale to tell your children. A dear child once said, ‘Father, I like to hear Mr. So-and-so preach, because he puts some “likes” into his sermons - “like this and like that.”‘“ Yes, children always love those ‘likes.’ Make parables, pictures, and diagrams for them, and you will always get on” (Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Teaching Children*, p. 355).

The large use of illustrations by such an eminent preacher should convince all that they are not merely for little children.

Our Lord in dealing with adults frequently employed illustrations. That oft-occurring phrase, “**the kingdom of heaven is like unto,**” suggests His recognition that the new instruction needed to be illustrated with the light of familiar scenes. How frequently He found material in nature and in human life that served so excellently to clarify His instruction!

Turning to the Old Testament, one is impressed with the frequent employment of illustrations by the prophets. To clarify truth:

- Jeremiah used the girdle, the bottle, and the potter’s vessel;
- Ezekiel, the roll, the tile, the beard;
- Amos, the locust, the plumbline, the summer fruits;
- Zechariah, the myrtle trees, the measuring line, the candlestick.

A striking object lesson was necessary before Peter could be brought to understand that God did not want his prejudices to stand in the way of his ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 10:9-16).

All of these instances of the use of the illustration are impressive. They place its value beyond dispute, and we are justified in making this device an important part of the teacher’s equipment. However, a word of warning needs to be sounded at this point. Important as is the illustration, its value is lessened if it is overdone. It is unfortunate when through a wrong emphasis the story is remembered and the truth it illustrates is forgotten. Better one or two striking illustrations that will remain in the mind of the pupil and will recall the truth to be expressed in his life, than a number which are simply remembered for the interest they aroused. Just as too much light dazzles the eye and impedes the vision, so also many illustrations may confuse perception and hinder thought.

II. VARIETY

The field of illustrations is a large one. One will be astonished at the many ways in which this important factor in teaching may be employed. There are, however, two general divisions.

1. Visual.

We are so accustomed to thinking of Sunday school teaching as talking that it is well to be reminded how much information a pupil receives through the eye-gate. Not only do children remember far better what they see than what they hear, but they also comprehend such instruction more easily and more quickly. For this reason it is easy to see that of those two modern agencies, the moving picture and the radio, the former surpasses the latter as an educator. Only in its larger reach can the radio be recognized as having superior advantage. That which is merely said to a pupil may not always convey the idea designed, since language has its limitations as a means of communication, especially when it is used incorrectly and the vocabulary is not large. But let the eye rest on some object related to the truth to be conveyed, and almost immediately the dubious look on the child’s face gives way to the smile of comprehension.

a. Objects.

There is a difference in using objects for study and for illustration.

When Christ placed a child in the center of the group, it was not that the little one might be the subject of a discussion, but a striking illustration of His instruction on humility.

As He taught the great truths of the kingdom of Heaven on the hillside, it is natural to suppose that He pointed to the “**sower that went forth to sow.**”

As His “school” assembled by the Sea of Galilee, perhaps in front of their eyes there were fishermen casting their nets into the sea.

When He said, “**Behold the fowls of the air,**” and, “**Consider the lilies of the field,**” language would suggest that these objects were at hand for Him to use as illustrations.

The shepherd and his sheep, a common sight in Palestine, must have been used to illustrate as well as inspire the many lessons that He drew from them.

b. Pictures.

All classes cannot meet in the country or have access to the living objects that characterized our Lord’s instruction. Pictures and photographs may be substituted. A Bible illustrated in colors is most appropriate for boys and girls just beginning to read. What words may fail to convey, the picture is sure to communicate.

Aside from the use of Bibles of this character, every teacher should be a collector of pictures, so that from an accumulated supply, suitable ones may be selected for the week’s lesson. Just as magazine articles are made doubly attractive by appropriate engravings, so the dullness of a lesson may be relieved by whatever pictures are used for its illustration.

c. Models.

Models of the ark, the temple, and Oriental houses will convey truth far more readily and accurately than architectural specifications and detailed descriptions. Even crude blackboard drawings and diagrams are invaluable. The larger the number of blackboard or chart outlines used in teaching, the more deeply the mind is impressed. This applies to the older as well as the younger pupils, and there is no age with which a teacher cannot use a blackboard to advantage.

d. Maps.

Maps always help a pupil to visualize locations, and should be used constantly, especially in lessons that involve the movements of its characters. Bibles that provide an ample supply of maps are always to be preferred; but in addition, large wall maps, which can be easily consulted, are a valuable means of conveying a correct estimate of situations and distance.

2. Verbal.

When an illustration must be presented by means of the ear-gate to gain entrance, it is most important that simple language be used. Because of the limited vocabulary of the child, care should be exercised in the selection of words lest the mind of the pupil be distracted in struggling with the meaning of some unfamiliar word that is being used.

a. Stories.

As Spurgeon has already suggested, there is nothing like the introduction of stories to command interest, as well as to relieve dullness of perception (Spurgeon, op. cit., p. 353). D. L. Moody recognized the possibility of making his messages clear to the masses by fascinating incidents. In his preaching he was unexcelled as a story-teller, and his printed sermons have attracted millions largely because of his ability to recast truth in story form.

(1) Bible

The very best verbal illustrations for the Sunday school teacher are found in the Bible itself, and therefore a complete knowledge of its narrative is essential. As the Bible story conveys the truth as God intended, one need not fear in the telling lest it should overshadow the lesson it illustrates, since it constitutes a God-given lesson in itself.

(2) Life

Next to the Bible stories, the teacher will get his best illustrations from the same place the Master-Teacher found His. While he may not be able to direct the eye, the teacher can please the ear with familiar sights and scenes. Real stories are always the best, and should be told as vividly as possible, although always faithfully portraying the details and not sacrificing the truth. Care must be exercised that in our enthusiasm to paint a vivid picture we do not exaggerate. Stories which contain improbable details lose their power and interest.

b. Comparisons.

Making comparisons is one of the easiest and simplest methods of illustration. Because of older pupils' greater knowledge and wider experience, this method can be used more successfully with them. It is not enough to say that sin is a dreadful thing and something to be avoided, but what is it like? The Bible likens sin to that loathsome and dreaded disease of leprosy. You will find it interesting to note how frequently our Lord used comparisons in His instruction. He declared of Himself, "**I am the bread of life**"; "**I am the living water**"; "**I am the Good Shepherd**"; "**I am the vine, ye are the branches.**" He called His disciples "**the salt of the earth,**" "**the light of the world.**"

c. Allusions.

An appeal to the intelligence of older pupils may be made by historical, biographical, literary, and scientific allusions.

This saves the times necessary to tell a story and fully serves the purpose of illustration in an educated group.

Note how frequently the scholarly Paul by similes and metaphors referred to nearly every walk of life. Dr. H. T. Kuist has pointed out that from his allusions it can be ascertained that Paul was familiar with law, medicine, architecture, warfare, agriculture, Greek games, seafaring life, and commercial life (Howard Tillman Kuist, *The Pedagogy of St. Paul*, p. 102).

III. VITALITY

What makes an illustration vital? It is just as important to understand the right use of an illustration as to understand the art of questioning. To be vital an illustration must be:

1. Brief.

Miss Plummer says: "Illustrations are to be employed as a scaffold is used for a building. No more of it is put up than is actually necessary; and the edifice when completed, is expected to stand by itself" (Plummer, *The Soul-Winning Teacher*, p. 53).

Whenever pupils become more absorbed in the illustration than the lesson itself, the illustration ceases to serve its purpose. When pupils remember the objects that have been exhibited or the story that has been told, and do not recall the instruction, the illustration may be more of a hindrance than a help. Brevity of statement that omits details may be used to adorn the main instruction, so that the illustration may be dismissed from the mind as soon as its object is accomplished.

2. New.

Illustrations may be rendered obnoxious by repetition. Old stories oft retold betray poverty or vanity on the part of the teacher, while the pupils lose their interest in the lesson and their esteem for the instructor. When the same illustration is used to impress various truths, there is apt to be confusion instead of clarity in the mind of the pupil. The most effective illustrations are drawn from recent events and daily experiences with which the pupils are all familiar. They possess a freshness that will make their appeal to every wide-awake boy and girl.

3. Apt.

There are illustrations that do not illustrate. If there is only a faint resemblance, or none at all, between the illustration and the instruction to be illuminated, nothing is accomplished by its use.

4. Comprehensible.

There is also the danger of using as an illustration something that is less familiar than the instruction to be clarified.

- An oasis means little to one who knows nothing of the desert.
- A jungle cannot be visualized by one who lives on a plain.
- Even the thought of God as Father may fail in its appeal to the boy who knows nothing of a father's love in the home.

Illustrations should be on the plane of the learner's experience. If they are too simple they will excite the contempt of the pupil. If they are too complicated they will not be grasped.

If the teacher knows his pupils - their school attainments, home life, desires and interests - mistakes will be avoided. It is hardly necessary to say that an incomprehensible illustration is far worse than none.

5. Elevating.

Illustrations may degrade the truth and debase the hearer by their poor taste.

Illustrations are likely to be bridges leading the thoughts down into the more entertaining and less hallowed regions from whence they are drawn. A teacher who makes too frequent use of humorous illustrations may be popular with his class, but his influence spiritually will be weakened, for the pupils will learn to think lightly of sacred things.

Illustrations that lack in dignity may seriously weaken a teacher's best efforts to impress a solemn truth.

Lester B. Mathewson, in his splendid textbook on *The Illustration*, provides a self-correcting course, covering every phase of its origin and use.

In the chapter he devotes to the use of illustrations with boys and girls, he lays down some important principles:

1. Never talk down to boys and girls. They resent any patronizing manner.
2. Everything you say must be within the range of their experience or understanding. One may tell many incidents or facts that are outside of their experience, if they are within the realm of their understanding.
3. The teacher's manner must be friendly and sympathetic with all that concerns them. Children want to know first of all if you understand their life, their ambitions, troubles, problems, perplexities, their ways of looking at things.
4. Be careful about letting them ask questions. If allowed to ask questions indiscriminately, their interrogations will probably be irrelevant or embarrassing to the teacher.
5. Words should be chosen carefully, so they will convey the meaning you desire. Boys and girls sometimes use words with a different meaning which they attach to them other than what adults generally give.
6. In speaking to children, the one prime factor on the human side is your personality, which must be of such nature that it draws children to you and wins attention when you speak. (Mathewson, *The Illustration in Sermon, Address, Conversation and Teaching*, p. 150).

QUESTIONS

1. How is the illustration related to the law of apperception?
2. Show how illustrations were frequently employed by Old and New Testament writers.
3. What is the danger in too frequent use of illustrations?
4. Name four types of visual illustrations.
5. How did our Lord use objects for illustrations?
6. How do models and maps illustrate the lesson material?
7. Contrast visual and verbal illustrations.
8. Why are Bible stories always preferable?
9. What was the threefold purpose of a parable?
- 10a. With whom should allusions be used?
- 10b. Why should they be used?
11. Name five requisites for a vital illustration.
12. When do illustrations not illustrate?

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