

Ministry Made Visual and Concrete



by EDWARD T. WELCH

A British pastor asked for three volunteers from among the children. Hands went up immediately, and he selected three to come to the front where steps went up to a platform surrounded by a waist-high wooden partition. The children's sermon was about to begin. This one would be about sin. His basic idea was that sin is a burden. He asked the first child—the tallest of the three—to join him and then produced a backpack from behind the partition. He placed it on the child's back. The backpack, it turns out, was no burden at all. The pastor reached into it and pulled out a yellow balloon. He went to the next child—probably a nine-year-old—and fitted her with a backpack. The backpack sagged under the weight inside, and the child said it was, indeed, heavy. The pastor reached in and pulled out some thick texts from his library. Then the smallest of the three, with the partition coming up to his chest, came forward to be fitted with his backpack. As soon as the pastor let the full weight of the backpack rest on the child's shoulders, the child vanished. The pastor looked down at the floor, which, from our vantage point, could now have been a bottomless pit. The church members were clearly alarmed. The pastor quietly said, "Oh my," in his British understatement. After what seemed to be enough time to call a rescue party, the

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pastor reached down, lifted the young child, opened the backpack, and took out a bowling ball. The child was fine, though probably had a new-found avoidance of both volunteering and bowling.

This event occurred about twenty years ago. There were, I am sure, other interesting events that day and that month, but I can only see this one, with every detail etched in my mind, and I cannot hear the word *burden* without watching that child disappear. This teaching strategy contrasts dramatically with a conference I attended that same year on Reformed theology for young adults. “God effectually calls,” the speaker began. “He also freely justifies, not by infusing righteousness into us, but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto us.” The speaker went on to mention propitiation, impassability, and a string of other theological words, all of which were nonsense syllables to the average listener. I remember the scene because of the sheer number of inaccessible words—important words—but ones you could not see or touch and most students would not remember.

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These incidents illustrate my concern that Christian language, in both public and personal ministry, is too often crowded with technical words and in-house jargon that can be unclear, inaccessible, and abstract. My desire is that biblical counselors be more like the British pastor and grow in language and illustrations that reach people’s hearts, even those who are barely paying attention.

On a more personal note, I remember a conversation with an intelligent and thoughtful unbeliever that turned to spiritual matters. Since the person seemed interested in going deeper, I said that our primary problem is that we are sinners. He responded with a simple and genuine question: “What is a sinner?” I had some ideas. “A transgressor against God’s law.” That would only be met with, “What does *that* mean?” Perhaps I could have described sin as “missing the mark” or even “a burden.” These are more concrete but have little gravity. So I asked if we could talk the next day as I considered his question.

In this article, I will focus on one feature of our words: the distinction between concrete and abstract. My goal is to mark this distinction as useful in ministry and to grow in using concrete and metaphorical language for abstract categories in a way that is apt, clear, attractive, and memorable. As I walk through examples of the differences between abstract and concrete, I want you to take in the examples slowly, and consider each one and how you could build on it. This is the language of the Wisdom Literature and the teaching of Jesus—vivid and available even to children.

Concrete and Abstract

Let's define our terms. *Concrete* thought and language identify the world that we see and experience. *Abstract* thought and language exist within us as categories, themes, patterns, connections, and theories. These are not seen or touched, though they are certainly important. *My house* is concrete. It's a particular house. You can see it and touch it. *Homes* or *houses* are abstract. They are the endless number of structures that other people live in. *Yes* and *no* are concrete. They stop action or start it. *Maybe*, which was so difficult for my children to understand when they were preschoolers, is abstract. Just try illustrating it. *Distance* is concrete. *Time* is abstract. *Fear* and *anxiety* are *usually* concrete. They identify a specific threat to life (fear), and you can actually feel that threat in your body (anxiety). *Emotions* are abstract and a mystery to many. *What?* is concrete. *Why?* is abstract.

The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980) suggested this distinction between concrete and abstract in his theory about child development. Contrary to a commonsense view that children are mini-adults who simply need to amass experience and information, Piaget identified four stages of child development. The first three stages, which reach to age eleven, exist in the concrete world of experience. So expect any children's book with longevity to be visually rich, like a fine children's sermon, with an occasional intrusion of something loud.

By age two, one of my children's early favorites was *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear* by Don Wood. It has a concrete title, to be sure, which they enjoyed saying loudly and slowly with me. The intrigue begins immediately. As the little mouse tries to

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