

THANK GOD FOR POWERPOINT!

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The very first ministers' conference I attended was in 1973 when Tom Houston, then the Director of the Bible Society, used an overhead projector. I was totally captivated by the opportunities for communication offered by this machine, with the result that a kind church member hearing of my new enthusiasm offered to buy the church an OHP, if the new minister would use it. And use it I did. In particular I used it for preaching. Indeed, I rarely preached without an OHP. I was convinced that people would be more likely to remember my sermons if they were able to 'see' them as well as hear them.

There is little doubt that my sermons improved as a result of using an OHP. They became sharper and clearer. They had to – there is no place for muzzy thinking on an acetate sheet. The headings of my sermons became pithier. I realised it wasn't enough to write on the acetate a phrase such as 'Salvation only in Jesus'; rather I needed to turn it into a statement: 'Only Jesus saves!'.

Today OHPs have gone out of fashion. Instead, PowerPoint is today's favoured medium for communication.

In some circles PowerPoint has gained a bad image. It has been said, for instance, that 'Power corrupts, and PowerPoint corrupts absolutely'. Other critics talk of there being 'more Power than Point' and of 'PowerPointlessness'. There is, of course, some substance to such criticisms. My mind goes to one of the first PowerPoint sermons I ever experienced, where letters, words and pictures were flying in from every conceivable direction. The presentation was so impressive that the words of the preacher were totally lost on me. However, the abuse of a medium does not invalidate a medium. Gizmos are not of the essence of a PowerPoint presentation. Indeed, when I did a PowerPoint course at our local university, I was told that gizmos are for children's presentations – gizmos, said my instructor, do not belong to any presentation of serious import.

Rightly used, however, PowerPoint is a great tool for today's preachers. A well-prepared PowerPoint presentation leads to greater effectiveness. But there is one major drawback: the preparation of a decent PowerPoint presentation can add several hours to a preacher's preparation. So what should we preachers do? Fortunately, in my particular case, the dilemma has been resolved through the good services of one of my church members. Every Wednesday – or Thursday morning at the latest – I give my friend Anne a copy of my script for Sunday, and she then produces the PowerPoint presentation. Having produced the presentation, she then gives a marked up copy of the script to the PowerPoint operator, indicating at which point changes are to be made to the screen. And because I normally keep fairly close to my script (although there are times when I feel 'inspired' to elaborate and wander off the original point!) it works. And as a result, the sermon, I dare to believe, is the better!

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