



Screening Out the Word

BY DEAN MERRILL

Thank God for technology. Aren't you glad for Palm Pilots, cordless microphones, and e-mail? The days of doing Sunday bulletins on messy mimeographs or having to fire up the church furnace by hand at 5 a.m. on Sundays are long gone.

Sometimes, however, technology gives us more than we bargained for. "Technology is not neutral," says University of Southern Mississippi professor Arthur W. Hunt, III.¹ "It has the propensity to change beliefs and behavior. For example, any historian will tell you that the printing press hurled Europe out of the Middle Ages and into the Protestant Reformation.

"What most often escapes our notice in public discussion is how new technologies create unintended effects. Techno-enthusiasts are incessantly expounding what a new machine can do for us, but little deliberation is ever afforded to what a new machine will do to us."

When I read that portion of Hunt's book, I paused to consider our ubiquitous love affair with PowerPoint and other projection technologies. Personally, I love them. I design my own slides for my speaking engagements, and occasionally help my church by running its system on Sunday mornings as part of the tech team. The multimedia impact is dramatic; we reinforce visually what is said from the

platform. The pastor starts to preach and the Scripture text appears on the screen for all to read. How convenient.

But what is this doing to the average person's engagement with the Word of God? What used to be a passage on a page in a book now stands alone. Every time the preacher goes to a new text, the next portion appears.

One result may be fewer churchgoers carrying their Bibles to church. Not only young moms laden down with a baby, a diaper bag, and a purse, but also those who have free hands. *Why bother?* they say to themselves. *Anything important is going to be projected on the screen.*

Not that heavenly favor is given for bringing a Bible into the sanctuary. There is some merit, however, in being able to scan the context of a verse, to look back a paragraph and determine what Isaiah or Peter was saying previously, to observe the overall argument, bookmark a passage for later reflection, or even write a cogent note in the margin.

Using PowerPoint unintentionally atomizes the Word of God and breaks it into random segments rather than presenting it as a unified revelation. God did not intend His Word to become a preacher's grab bag of one-liners from which to bolster sermon points. This practice makes the Word less central to one's life of faith.

If people do not need the Bible on Sundays, then maybe they do not need it on weekdays either. Personal devotions? Wrestling with the theme of Nehemiah or Romans? That is too daunting. After all, something from those books will be on the screen next month, or next year.

Just as the microwave made profound changes in how people prepare family meals, just as the iPod is revolutionizing how people select and listen to popular music, so projection technology is impacting how (and how much) people absorb God's Word. Not everything that can be done should be done.

Many Christian leaders know how it feels to give a newspaper reporter a 45-minute interview (despite their busy schedule), to fully explain the nuances of a theological or ethical subject, and then find only two sentences used in the final article. They feel used and taken advantage of. They tried to give serious, intelligent answers to the questions when the reporter only wanted a brief clip.

Does God feel that way when His revelation is reduced to 25 words or less? What do we miss in our push to make everything concise?

Engaging pew-sitters on Sunday morning is the fervent desire of pastors. None intend to marginalize the Word of God. All wish personal Bible reading in their congregations would grow instead of wither. The challenge is to ensure technology aids that goal rather than works against it.

What if, instead of displaying a verse or two, only the reference was projected on the screen so people would know where to follow in their Bibles as the text was being read? Granted, when a speaker says, "I want us to go to the account of the Triumphal Entry starting in Luke 19:28," some listeners may get the numbers garbled or may even miss the name of the book. It would be helpful to show the text reference while the pastor reads aloud. That way everybody would eventually be able to find his place.

If some do not find the correct paragraph, it is not the end of the world. There is also a benefit from simply listening to the Word of God. Some people, in fact, are far more adept at oral learning than at getting knowledge from a page. When Paul told his young apprentice, "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture" (1 Timothy 4:13), I doubt members of the Ephesus church had scrolls in their laps. They became grounded in the truth of God mainly by hearing it.

Many people in business and higher education have suffered through PowerPoint seminars where virtually every spoken word from the podium also appeared on the screen. The result is dullness, lack of suspense, and no dynamic surprise in the presentation. It would be far better for the speaker to hold center court and use good rhetorical skills along with visual enhancements wherever they fit best. The visual, however, should not steal the thunder of the oral. The screen must not upstage the spoken word. Keep some things to catch the audience off guard.

Whatever we choose to do with technology, we must not reduce the Bible to an ancillary role. It is far more than a resource for one-liners and proof texts. It is "the revelation of God to man, the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct" (A/G Fundamental Truth No. 1). Anything that disconnects believers from that storehouse of wisdom is not an improvement, but a hindrance. Pastors must always remain, and teach their congregations to remain "people of the Book." ■



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ENDNOTE

1. Arthur W. Hunt, III, *The Vanishing Word* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2003), 14,17.