



Engaging Life and Scripture with Images

A Pathway for 21st Century Spiritual Formation

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As we think about ministry to people of all ages for today's world, two things are obvious. They are living very different lives than in the past, and engaging Scripture remains profoundly important for any spiritual journey. How we deeply link life and Scripture within the hearts and minds of people is often the unspoken challenge we face as we seek to help them establish a vibrant lifelong faith within the cultural contexts in which people live and hopefully flourish.

Ubiquitous Images for Socialization

The unalterable reality is that images are constantly swirling all around us throughout today's global society¹. We are ingesting them in mass doses and forming meanings through them that impact our daily lives. These meanings are often under-scrutinized. We do not reflect and put into words the power and meaning of each and every image we see. We simply don't have the time to do so.

The forces that shape us—that socialize us into members of a culture—have traditionally included parents, schools, churches and peers. In the past, these shapers of emerging generations relied on words in the context of real-time life to have their effect of conveying the values, morals, and human identity that lead to thriving within a society.

Today socialization is driven by images as well as words. And often these images are absorbed individually or with peers more than explored together with adults. The mid-twentieth century saw the mass inclusion of TV into the socialization process. The end of the twentieth century saw the Internet (including delivery by way of hand held mobile devices) gain increasing influence over young people.

Images influence people! The business world has figured this out. They spend countless dollars advertising their products and services—and they often use images. Images sear messages into our memories. They create emotional links to concrete products. They help create desired identities—buy this and you'll be like that person. And much of the influence of images in today's world is devoid of Biblical values.

Estimate:
We are exposed to
3,000 advertising
images daily and we
have the time to
somewhat process
under 300 of them.¹

¹ Lamoureux, David. <http://www.fluidrivemedia.com/advertising/marketing-messages/>

The 21st century horizons for images include the older forms—TV, computers, tablets and smartphone—and now we are at the beginning stages of holographic augmented reality. The ability to engage life with images in 3-D without real-time consequences for what we do with those augmentations will usher in a time when our young people can have experiences with touch, sound and sight from a detached position.

Ignore, Withdraw or Engage

As followers of Christ, we can employ a variety of strategies in light of the power of images within the socialization process. We can simply ignore the massive changes around us. We have little power to change them, so just ignore them. Or we might run. We see what's happening and withdraw from engagement with the world around us—including the world of images. Though some may be tempted to withdraw, followers of Jesus see that in order to bring the Gospel of Jesus across generations and cultures we must engage with the created world and help others engage with Scripture, especially in a manner that truly impacts their hearts, minds and souls.

The purpose of this paper is to address the underpinnings of engaging life and Scripture with images. In this pursuit, we will look at utilizing images for transference of meanings that are transformative in our lives.

Goals for Using Images

As we consider using images in ministry, we should consider “For what end?” The goals for using images with people can include: attention, entertainment, education, and spiritual transformation.

Images are often used to gain people's attention. Without their attention, it is difficult to influence others with words, images or actions. Images are an effective way to grab attention. Much of today's marketing uses images to gain attention, create or highlight a need and then give a very brief message that is served up in a manner for people to remember and recall the identity of a product or service. Our all consuming way of life depends on grabbing attention, creating need for new products we didn't know we needed, and lodging into our memories an identifiable product so that we will spend our money and keep the system of supply and demand intact.

Images can entertain us. The global film industry brought in over \$88 billion in revenues in 2013². We are a people taught to break from the boredoms, hardships and even joys of the real world by entering the adventures of a world founded in fantasy or the fantastic display of the real-time world. We like packing years of life into 30 to 120 minute movies. We are entertained and shaped by

² <http://www.statista.com/statistics/259985/global-filmed-entertainment-revenue/>

withdrawing from reality and entering a world of images served in a rapid succession. And this entertainment can spur our imaginations as we craft the world we will inhabit—for good or for bad.

Images are used for education. We learn many valuable facts from documentaries, how-to video clips, family photo albums, etc. Pictures from the Hubble telescope have shown us the enormity and diversity of our universe first hand. Wartime photos have educated us about the brutality of human domination. This project seeks to use images to teach people about the Biblical story and connect with the ways that the world they live in is being rapidly restructured to accommodate the realities of human innovations and their consequences.

Images can also be used for spiritual transformation. The goal of engaging life and Scripture with images is to use images to encourage people to grow in Christ—to be spiritually transformed into His image. As we disciple people of all generations, we must not settle for keeping their attention, entertaining them or even providing Christian education. Our goal is spiritual transformation. In *“Beholding the Triune God: A Lifelong Journey in Spiritual Transformation and Service”*, I address a transformative journey into the heart of God.³

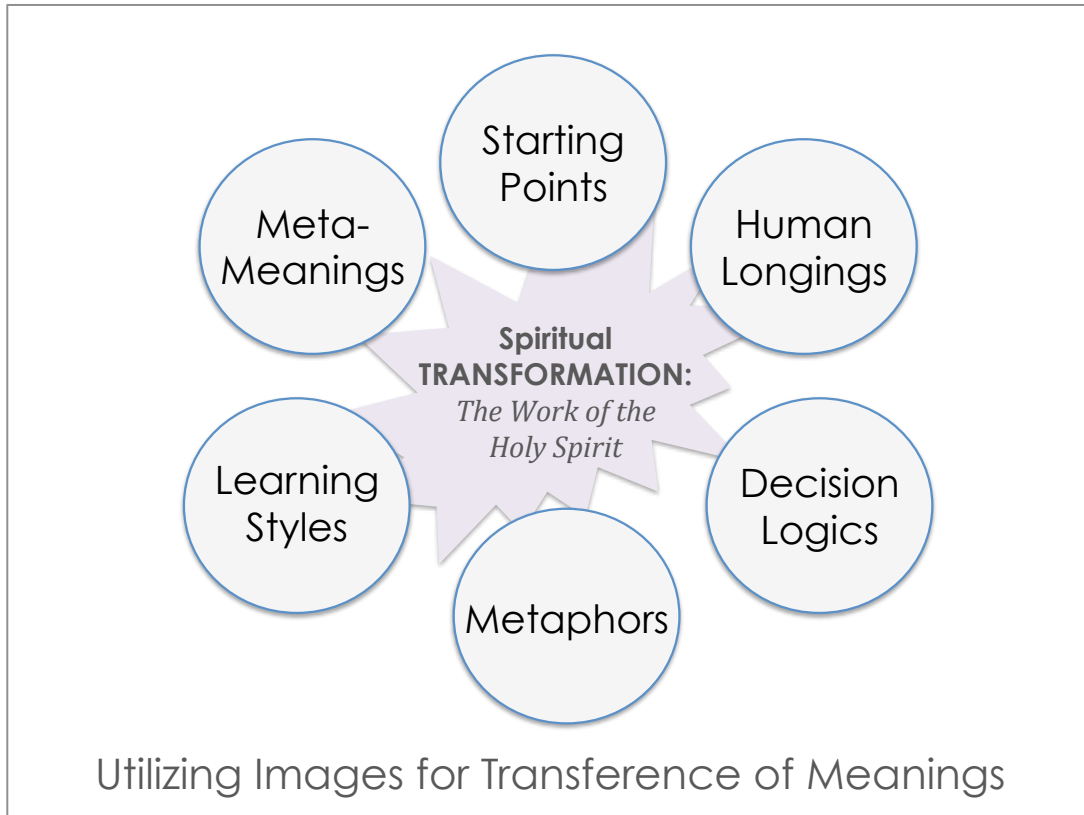
Images can take us where words cannot. That is the way God designed us. There are personal and relational ways to use images in ministry to others, as well as in our own process of personal growth.

Worth a Thousand Words, 2012

An Overview

The following figure depicts the primary elements at play in utilizing images for transference of meanings in a manner that encourages spiritual transformation. We will examine each of these elements as we seek to apply them to generations profoundly shaped by images.

³ Ennis, Ralph (2015). *Beholding the Triune God: A lifelong journey of spiritual transformation and service*. <http://www.ralphennis.com/my-resources.html>



Starting Points

A critical element in engaging people with the Gospel of Jesus is to know their starting points. Jesus started with people where they were. He didn't ask them to change before He engaged with them. Jesus engaged in conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well from her starting point—the necessity of water. He dealt with the Syrophenician woman from her starting point—the unworthiness of dogs. While most of us would be offended by Jesus calling us “dogs”, the starting point of the woman seeking healing for her child was her own sense of the unworthiness of her request. She was not offended.

When we consider that each person, young and old, has internalized images and words in their minds, integrated with experiences in life, these images help form our view of the world and our emotionality related to those views. These views are our starting points. Within the context of our emotionally laden worldviews, we all are driven to make decisions to fulfill our longings. These decisions impact our personal lives and the world around us.

Understanding the starting points that people carry within them helps us reach their hearts and can help them connect Scripture with daily life. But how do we understand their view of the world while they seek to express themselves with various levels of abstractions? One strategy is to employ images. The assortment of images below might represent a person's view of life. These images, with a few

words to describe them, can give great understanding into this person's view of the world.



As we consider formation of faith across the generations, these starting points, that help or hinder real connection with God, can be overlooked. Whether young or old, people in an age of diversity and moral ambiguities, struggle to process and act on their beliefs and values. However, in today's world of images, most young people have been exposed to a world far beyond themselves and their local context. Identifying the images that attract and repel them can help us better understand their starting points as we engage with life and Scripture.

Human Longings

At the center of the Christian story lies the richness of both our desires and our giftedness. As humans we simply long for more. More love, more resources, more excitement, more silence, more knowledge, more power, more peace, more something. Anything less than more is boredom! (See Appendix A regarding human longings.)

As we seek to fulfill our human longings, we often are not aware of the degree to which we are driven by these longings. Longings are God-given reminders that we are dependent beings—we are simply not self-sufficient, we aren't like God.

Ultimately, our longings are only fulfilled by the grace and presence of the Triune God in our lives.

Even our strengths foretell our longings. We may be gifted in various arenas and driven to contribute with those strengths. We want to make a difference. And in this difference making, we use our strengths—and we may also be seeking to fulfill our longing to be needed and to belong.



An image can convey much of what we both long for and resist. We can see in the eyes of the children in the above image hopes along with apprehensions as they role-play an imagined future in their life journey.

Engaging life's longings with images is a means of influencing our life journeys. We can employ images that touch hearts and unpack those images to shape our view of life. And we can engage Scripture with these images, thus allowing the Biblical story to live in and through the power of the emotional connections made possible by engaging the image.

Decision Logics with Imagined Outcomes

As we seek (or are driven) to fulfill our longings, we make decisions and we imagine the outcomes of those decisions—sometimes with uncanny accuracy and other times with little realism. As we make decisions, we form preferences for how we make future decisions.

Our decision logics include logics of intellect and logics of emotions. We use our intellectual reasoning to discern and decide truth from error, good from evil, and power from powerlessness. Our emotional logics employ honor and shame, trust and fear and freedom and bonding.

We imagine outcomes of our decisions before we enact them. These imaginations can help us thrive or continue to survive. They will shape our desired identity or keep us from an undesired identity. And they will help us establish life meanings in what might otherwise be a meaningless world.⁴

Our developmental processes allowed us to seamlessly and fairly unconsciously negotiate these logics and imaginations from childhood as we develop lifelong patterns for making decisions. And images help this imaginative process.

In today's world our imaginations are on super-drive. When the world revolved around oral traditions, each person fed their imaginations on the limits of another's future orientations. Today, with images, the same dynamic is at play, but on super-drive. As we see with our minds' eyes, we can imagine the next step forward in rapid succession.

Image-enhanced decisions plot our pathway forward into life. Thus we need to embrace and better understand the power of images that influence our imaginations and decision making.

Meanings and Metaphors

Metaphors are the links within language systems that glue our understandings together. Without metaphors, we would struggle to make meaning of our world. Almost all "fact" would become disconnected, fragmented tidbits of information without meaningful understanding.

Consider the metaphor of a lion in Scripture. Jesus is referred to as a Lion (Revelation 5:5) but so is the devil (1 Peter 5:8). By linking the attributes of a lion to both Jesus and Satan, we are left to parse out the similarities and the differences between these three. Within this linguistic play, we form the meanings that help us negotiate the world we live in and grow in our faith.

Gerald and Lindsay Zaltman (2008) identify seven "deep metaphors" in their book *Marketing Metaphoria*⁵ that they believe communicate to consumers in a way

A metaphor is a figure of speech that identifies one thing as being the same as some unrelated other thing, for rhetorical effect, thus highlighting the similarities between the two.

- Wikipedia

⁴ Ennis, Ralph (2004). A theoretical model for research in intercultural decision making. *Intercultural Communication Studies*. 8:113-124

⁵ Zaltman, Gerald and Zaltman, Lindsay (2008). *Marketing Metaphoria: What deep metaphors reveal about the minds of consumers*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

that make meanings. By appealing to the metaphors that a target audience connect with related to a particular product or service, a marketer has a better chance of influencing the customer to buy. (These seven deep metaphors are listed in Appendix B.)

In the church, we are not called to “sell” the gospel. Rather we are called to offer the reconciling grace of God (2 Corinthians 5: 11-21). And God’s grace provides the fulfillment to our longings. Even so, we know that our longings have been tainted with brokenness in a rebellious world. As we communicate God’s mercy and grace, we will want to employ metaphors. We can link one thing with another to bring meanings that make sense to people in our world. Those metaphors can be encased in words or images or both.

For example, an image of an abandoned Teddy Bear (see below) is an image metaphor for our life without God and the abandonments we all experience in life. It pulls the heart to consider the unmet longing to belong to someone. This image invites dialogue about the *Someone* to belong to. As you view this image, reflect on the following:

- How would you describe this image to another person?
- What aspect of this image most grabs your attention?
- What story does this image tell?
- What emotions surface as you consider this image?
- Where might God be in this image? What would He be doing?
- Where would you put yourself in this image? (If at all.)
- Is there a time in your life when you’ve felt similar emotions?
- Where was God then and what was He doing in your life?
- Is there a Scripture passage you know that relates to this image?
- Consider that passage as you continue to view the image. What is God saying to you from the passage? How is God inviting your story to be in His story?

These and similar questions can work for a multitude of images. The art of linking images with Scripture flows through asking reflective questions to engage people’s hearts and the Author of Scripture.



Learning Styles Plus Images

We each hone our way of learning as we go through life. General patterns of learning styles have been described by David Kolb (1984)⁶. He suggests we preference how we learn on two axes: concrete-abstract and active-reflective. I would also suggest that we preference words and images.

Another way of conceiving this would be to consider types of images. Some images are abstract in nature. Reflective-abstract learners may be drawn to these images. Some images display active and concrete themes. Those who are active-concrete learners may be drawn to those images.

In ministry we need to be aware of the preferences of those who are learning from us. If we gear our influence for those who are reflective and abstract, we may not help those with an active, concrete orientation to learning. Most ministries employ all the various learning styles at some point in time. However over time, ministries develops their style of communicating which often appeals to only one or two styles of learning.

As the global population is increasingly learning from images, we need to adjust our teaching—our transmission of meanings—to embrace new styles of learning. Much is at stake. If we fail to make this significant shift, we may also fail to connect the message of the Jesus with those who disparately need Him. Images can be a significant aspect of our transmission of meanings.

Meta-Meanings: Linking Images with Scriptures

Consider Paul's statement in Galatians 4:5, "... that we might receive adoption to sonship." Such profound truth is foundational to our life of faith in Christ. We are adopted children of God! But does that statement of fact impact the interior of our hearts in a way that influences our decisions and way of being as we seek the fulfillment of our longings from our current starting points? Or is this truth only catalogued in memory for retrieval during church gathering that require such knowledge?

Re-consider the Teddy Bear image. What do you see? Some see a little stuffed bear on a brick street and nothing more. For others, this bear expresses their very selves—lost or discarded on the hard streets of their life-journeys with the fading hope of a flower—longing to belong and be loved by someone. Young people, those socialized with images, often report seeing this latter personal association with the image.

As we proactively link Scripture with images, we make the pathway for connecting our hearts with facts a much easier road to travel. Though Christian faith is based in facts, it is a faith that is driven by the redemptive heart of God. The more

⁶ Kolb, David A. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

we align our hearts with the heart of God, the more vibrant our faith will be and the more our human longings will be fulfilled in God.

Images and Spiritual Transformation

Images do not transform people. The Holy Spirit of God does that work. However, images expose the longings of our hearts in a manner that we can see how God desires to meet us with grace and mercy—and that is transformative. Words are still very powerful in the visual global culture that is surfacing. However, images with words that unpack these images have a power to connect with people in ways that a word-dominated approach to ministry cannot begin to reach. Engaging life and Scripture with images can be a spiritually transformative journey.

This journey with God and into the heart of God focuses on five directives from Scripture. First the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-38), we are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Images can be of particular help in exploring the heart issues of our love for God. The Second Commandment (Matthews 22:39) is to love your neighbors as yourself. This love is forgiving, merciful, patient, truth-filled, joyful—redemptive love. Images can help us reframe the concept of “love” in an “I” culture where love is often conceived as “you tolerate/empower my pursuits for pleasure.” The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19,20): we are to make disciples of all nations. Our faith is to be lived, demonstrated and shared with others across generations and cultures. Images can help us communicate the story of Jesus and His ways to all people, especially those socialized with images. Fourth, we are called to steward nature and build culture with ethical goodness. This directive is based in the culture and nature commands (and implications) given to Adam and Eve (Genesis 1: 28). Lastly, we are to live life well in Jesus, exploring His way of life, as we are being transformed into His image (Ephesians 4:1-32). In all, images can help us connect life with Scripture and Scripture with life in ways that become transformative.

Images as Tools

Images are tools that can powerfully move our hearts and shape our way of looking at life. Skill is needed to maximize any tool. As we seek to become masters of our tools, even as a violinist is a master of his violin, we must acknowledge that we will sometime make beauty music and at other time make a clanging noise.

The venture of engaging life and Scripture with images takes practice. At first you may wonder whether or not the journey is worth the effort. However, others have gone before you and followed this amazing pathway to connect to people journeys and to connect the Scriptures to their hearts.

Below are three stories by others who are engaging in mastering images as tools for ministry⁷:

Judy Gomoll, Stories of Using Images in Ministry

Karen Warin, Come to the Banquet: Creative Quiet Times with God

Concluding Remarks

Jesus knew the *starting points* of people. He understood human *longings*. He appealed to people to make *decisions* right where they lived. He used many word *metaphors* common in His day. He adapted to the *learning styles* of his audience. He created *meta-meanings* related to the Triune God and His Kingdom. And He knew people would be *spiritually transformed* by the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter and Teacher. He also called His followers to partner with Him in this redemptive work. God has brought us to a place in history where we need to adapt and bring the use of images as an essential tool in the formation of faith of people who are daily influenced by images as well as words.

⁷ All are available at <http://vibrantfaith.org/research/projects/>

Appendix A – Human Longings

Below is a list of human longings that I have observed. This is not to be considered a complete list of human longings across cultures. Rather use this list of longings as a starting point for your exploration.

Human beings are driven to action in order to fulfill their innate longings, such as:

IDENTITY – Who am I?

1. Belong – Group Affiliation and Differentiation
2. Intimacy – Be Known and Not Alone
3. Romance – Expressing Masculinity/Femininity
4. Glory – Honorable Identity

ADAPTATION – How to live?

1. Protect – Safety
2. Provide – Share with Others
3. Acquire – Accumulation of Wealth
4. Power – Influence, Conquer, Dominate
5. Build – Make Better Society
6. Order – Efficiency
7. Nurture – Grow Self, Others, Things
8. Sustainability – Peace
9. Change – Transformation of Being
10. Movement – Journey of Life
11. Justice – Social Fairness
12. Mercy – Reconciled Relationships
13. Replicate – Procreation

MEANING – Why live?

1. Explore – Experience and Discover
2. Know – Categorize and Synthesizing
3. Create – Enacted Imaginations
4. Transcend – Eternity
5. Perfection – Beauty

Appendix B – Zaltmans' Deep Metaphors

1 - BALANCE

Justice, Equilibrium, and the Interplay of Elements

2 – TRANSFORMATION

Changes in Substance and Circumstances

3 – JOURNEY

Meeting of Past, Present, and Future

4 – CONTAINER

Inclusion, Exclusion, and Other Boundaries

5 – CONNECTION

Need to Relate to Oneself and Others

6 – RESOURCE

Acquisitions and Their Consequences

7 – CONTROL

Sense of Mastery, Vulnerability, and Well-Being

From: Zaltman, Gerald and Zaltman, Lindsay (2008). *Marketing Metaphoria: What deep metaphors reveal about the minds of consumers*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Press.

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Image-Based Resources from the Author

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Stokes, Ennis, Gomoll, Weddle (2015). *Worth a Thousand Words: The power of images to transform hearts*.

These and other resources by the author can be found at:
<http://www.ralphennis.com/my-resources.html>