



The Visual Faith Project: Engaging Scripture and Life with Images.

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Vibrant Faith

Images have power that words do not. This is an initial report of the first round of research from *The Visual Faith Project*. At its core, this project explores a *methodology* for discipling, engaging, and teaching the messages of Scripture with an expressed goal of transformation for young people completely socialized by images. Research assertions are based on adolescent starting points responses (regarding both image aversions and attractions). The project employs both brain research, and faith practices to make the case for the use of images to engage scripture and provide ministry. Implications for youth ministry practice will be discussed.

As we think about ministry to adolescents in the first decades of the 21st century, two things are obvious. People are living very different lives than in the past, and engaging Scripture remains profoundly important for all spiritual formation. How we deeply link life and Scripture within the hearts and minds of young 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 they live and hopefully thrive and flourish as image-bearers of the Creator.

The Ubiquity of Images in Socialization

Quite simply, images now have power that words do not. The unalterable reality is that images are constantly swirling all around us throughout today's global society. It is estimated that we are exposed to 3,000 advertising images daily, and have the time to process under 300 of them¹. We are ingesting them in mass doses and forming meanings through them that impact our daily lives. Meanings stemming from images 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 young people—that socialize them 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, the process of 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. Delivery systems like television, the Internet and then the “Internet in my hand” have become primary socializing realities for the generations under the age of 40 especially. The advancing ability to engage life with images in 3-D will usher in a time when people can have experiences with touch, sound and sight from a detached position.

We know that images influence people. The business and marketing world has this figured out. They spend countless dollars advertising products and services—and they 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. We can have long discussions about how much of the influence of images in today's world reflects the Biblical narrative.

Ignore, Withdraw or Engage

Despite these realities, much of the Christian church often continues to engage the power of Scripture as word only—even with adolescents. However, as followers of Christ, we can employ classic missional strategies in light of the power of images within the socialization process. We can simply ignore the

massive changes around us, as we have little power to change them. We see what's happening and withdraw from engagement with the world around us—including the world of images. Followers of Jesus must 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 powerfully impacts their hearts, minds and souls. One can only wonder if much of the Biblical Illiteracy that is rampant in both church and culture might not be the consequences of our unwillingness to engage images as the gift they are for connecting people with the Word.

Goals for Using Images

As we consider engaging the culture by using images to connect people with Scripture as well as in ministry, we need to be asking ourselves “To what end?” The goals for using images with people regularly 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 consumer driven way of life depends on grabbing attention, creating need for new products we didn't know we needed, and lodging the image of an identifiable product into our memories so that we will spend our money.

Facebook has learned and further driven this reality, and regularly uses images as the foundation of their sharing algorithm. Groups seeking to attract attention to their posts have learned the essential nature of the background image to further the possibility of follower engagement in “likes” and “shares”.

Images can entertain us. The global film industry brought in over \$88 billion in revenue in 2013². We are a people taught to break from the boredom, 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 90-120 minute movies. We are entertained and shaped by withdrawing from reality and entering a world of images served in a rapid succession. Film takes us with it and allows us to powerfully experience a story. And this entertainment can spur our imaginations as we craft the world we will inhabit.

This has often been the place where the church has been able to jump in to engage Scripture, with new movies and cartoons designed to help people know and get caught up in the Biblical story.

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

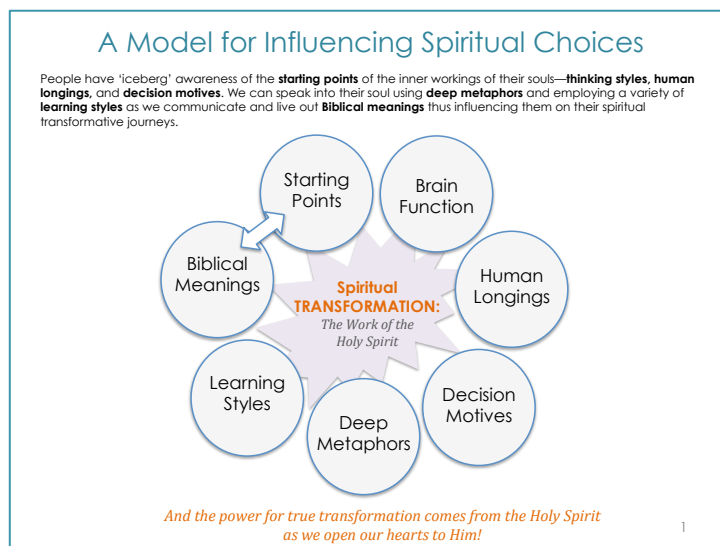
domination. Thus, the Visual Faith Project seeks to use images to teach people about the Biblical story and connect with the world they live in.

Images can also be used for spiritual transformation. The primary 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 can simply gain their attention, entertain them or even provide Christian education. We believe that the state of the Christian church today shows the limited power of those three goals. Our goal is spiritual transformation.

Simply put, 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. We can use images to engage nonbelievers in evangelistic conversations and also to move us toward discipleship from the inside out. Biblical concepts, principles, propositions, and truths are very important as final conclusions, but not as effective as starting points in spiritual conversations—especially to a generation socialized by images.³

The Shape of Spiritual Transformation

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.



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

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 Eden—perfect and abundant love, resources, creation, excitement, silence, knowledge, power, peace, and intimate relationship with our Creator. Anything less than Eden is the reality of life in our broken world that naturally leaves us longing for more. (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 the 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 visible 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. 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 "facts" 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 identify seven "deep metaphors" that they believe communicate to consumers in a way that make meanings in their book *Marketing Metaphoria*⁵. 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), which alone provides the fulfillment to our longings. Even so, we know that our longings have been tainted with brokenness in a fallen world. As we communicate God’s mercy and grace, we have to employ meaningful metaphors. We can link one thing with another to bring meanings that make sense to people in our world. Those metaphors have long been encased in words, and we assert that they much also be shared in concert with images.

Images, Brain Studies and Learning Styles

There is also a biological element to the process of spiritual transformation and several aspects of this have emerged from the nascent field of brain studies. While the field of youth ministry has quickly absorbed the insights of the field of brain studies regarding adolescent undeveloped frontal lobes, risk-taking behavior and the massive brain pruning process that is adolescent development, we have not integrated those discoveries with equally compelling discoveries about how our brains work for processing learning, emotion, and experience, all essential elements of the formation of faith.

Remarkably little study has been done in the area of brain function related to adolescent faith development. However, in his 2008 book *Brain Rules*, John Medina makes it clear that vision is by far the most dominant of the five senses, and that what we see will profoundly trump the data gathered by our other senses.⁶ Interestingly enough for this work, the brain’s manner of processing the visual is far more complex than originally imagined and engages both emotion and especially experiences in the simple process of seeing. Not surprisingly, Medina makes a strong plea for pictures as a powerful tool in education and for learning.

In addition, the individual biology of learning styles affects the ways that the Spirit forms us. We each hone our way of learning as we go through life. David Kolb has described general patterns of learning styles⁷. He suggests we preference how we learn on two axes: concrete-abstract and active-reflective. We would also suggest that we preference images or we preference words.

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, ministry with students have developed its own 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 and discipling—our transmission of meanings—to embrace new styles of learning. There is no right and wrong about these different manners of processing information. The reality is that 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 desperately 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?

Consider the Teddy Bear image on page 12. 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 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—and young people especially, 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.

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.

The Research Project

The Visual Faith Project seeks to tap into the power of images to engage people with God's presence in Scripture. We believe that the utilization of images in engaging Scripture will increase the awareness of and capacity for engaging the challenges of becoming disciples of Jesus of all generations, and especially young people. The Visual Faith Project sees images as a means for education, and also as having the power to engage our hearts and minds as we consider Scripture.

Since many of our current discipleship processes have been designed to engage the mind only, we have looked to knowledge—empirical data, logical thinking for progress. However, more than knowledge is needed when it comes the process of forming faith. We know that we learn and remember best through pictures, not through written or spoken words.

The Visual Faith Project is an action research project using evocative photographic images as a vehicle for Scriptural engagement and Christian transformation. This project seeks test and expand our knowledge by connecting the power of image with the promised power of God's word.

Vibrant Faith is a Christian not-for-profit research organization dedicated to engaging effective faith forming processes for a changing world. We believe that Christian formation has become sidetracked by systems designed for previous generations, and urgently needs to be refocused on doing what matters—those processes that the Holy Spirit has always utilized for forming faith in vehicles that speak today. We help Christian leaders make change happen in churches by engaging in action-research projects, in training, in coaching and in digital strategies. We were delighted to receive a donor gift in January of 2015 that allowed us to engage the Visual Faith work.

At its core, The Visual Faith Project is exploring a *methodology* for discipling, engaging, and teaching the messages of Scripture. The methodology consists of pairing images with sections of scripture encouraging to connection with Scripture through the stories in the images. The conversation is guided by a series of questions designed to mine the lenses through which participants view the world and that influence their ability to absorb the messages of God's Word.

The Visual Faith Project encourages “visualcy” in three substantive ways:

- Visual Faith accompanies provocative images with questions that allow people to see and hear one another's hearts and engage one another's souls.
- Because of the use of images, this methodology engages the individual's natural aversions and as well creates a natural invitation encouraging

deeper levels of conversation and space for the Spirit to move and have impact through the words of Scripture.

- The use of provocative *still* images is intentional. Images invite people to tap into their own story to engage Scripture.

We believe this is a powerful tool for discipleship, with individuals, for families and with groups. The process of listening and asking questions about people's connection with an image accompanied by Scripture is simple, accessible and will allow people of all ages the opportunity to engage Scripture together. Our research project is designed to test out our hunches with a wide variety of people in a variety of settings. The research design consists of two initial rounds of testing:

- 1.) Using images to test adolescent and parental starting points (what images tell their spiritual stories)
- 2.) use of that data to create multiple prototype Scripture engagement tools and test their use and efficacy.

Vibrant Faith has been engaged in the first round of "Image Starting Points" Research with groups of people under the age of 40 who attend a variety of protestant and Catholic churches in five different cities across the US. We have completed 60% of the research groups with the rest to be completed in 2015. We are in the midst of processing the Image Starting Points results and will be providing initial insights at the AYME conference in October of 2015.

We have developed an online database of just over 3000 copyright-free images. Our goal is to reach 5000 in 2016. These images are being tagged with both research and theological themes. We plan to do another round of tagging with Bible verses. We believe our image database will become a rich and helpful resource for Biblical engagement.

We have developed two versions of Visual Luke and are testing them for their power to create experiences with Scripture for people. We also have our consultants in five cities throughout the US testing out 10 distinct prototypes for use of the Visual Faith methodology in church settings in five regional sites across the United States. The prototypes consist of three varieties of personal devotions; service engagement; Intergenerational programs; Hungers of Youth Programs, Group Scripture Experiences, and a program for discipleship. The consultants are using pre and post use evaluation of the Visual Faith process for people's self-reporting of connection with Scripture and transformation. This prototype testing has begun and will continue throughout 2016.

Upon successful testing and revision, the Visual Faith processes, program models, and resources (print, visual, online, apps) will be made available. The Visual Faith Project concludes with training leaders through gathered workshops, online education, and digital resources.

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 young people who are daily influenced by images as well as words. We need to help people of all ages engage Scripture visually, as people more visually driven than ever, we need to translate Scripture in the graphic language of the people.

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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.

Endnotes

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- ² <http://www.statista.com/statistics/259985/global-filmed-entertainment-revenue/>
- ³ Denise Stokes, Ralph Ennis, Judy Gomoll, and Christine Weddle. *Worth a Thousand Words: The Power of Images to Transform Hearts*. Kindle, locations 508-510]
- ⁴ Ennis, Ralph (2004). A theoretical model for research in intercultural decision making. *Intercultural Communication Studies*. 8:113-124
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