

P.S.

POWERPOINT presentations can be very good, but, as is known only too well, they can also be very bad. So bad, in fact, that the wrong presentation in the wrong hands can be far worse than no presentation at all.

The expression 'death by PowerPoint' was coined to remind presenters of the dangers of the tools they wield. I was introduced to it by an American academic from Japan who was a guru of business communication. The fellow had some strange ideas—like the notion that a successful life ought to be modelled on a Japanese bento lunch box(!)—but on the point about the dangers of PowerPoint he was absolutely spot on.

Even his bento-box analogy had some merit in relation to communication. If you've ever eaten from a bento box you'll know it consists of a small rectangular box neatly divided into compartments, with a small portion of food or drink placed tidily in each compartment. Nothing is oversized; everything has its place: a corner for a light salad, another for dessert; a place for two pieces of sushi, another for ginger, and another for soy sauce. There is no 'pile it on and mix it up' here; a bento box is all about moderation, presentation, system, neatness and organisation.

It is not difficult to see how these things relate to a presentation. One of the great dangers of PowerPoint is the way in which it allows a presentation to become overloaded, whether it be with information, bullets, fonts, effects, pictures—or simply too many slides. Used over-enthusiastically, PowerPoint can have a sickening or soporific effect on an audience. It has to be controlled.

Suppose we were to take a stab at some of the keys to not inflicting PowerPoint harm on an audience. Some easy wins are:

- Keep the slide count down to ten or fewer slides per talk. The more slides, the more the audience is looking away from the speaker, breaking the connection and conviction.
- Keep the slides clean and simple.
- Don't put too much information on a slide.
- Too little information on a slide can also be a problem. A slide that simply says 'POW!' in large letters may *occasionally* be effective, but overused it insults the audience.
- Only read slides to the audience in exceptional

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circumstances. The whole point of a slide is that the audience can see it for themselves.

- Cut down on special effects. They're not special any more.
- Don't let slides interrupt the flow of a talk. There is a time just to *talk*, because that's the best way of building rapport and communicating belief and conviction. These are essential to a talk which centres around *faith*.

A talk isn't about the slides. It's about the Bible and about the message.

It's also worth remembering that a good presentation doesn't *have* to be accompanied by slides. Indeed, the best ones often are not. Somewhat perversely, it may actually make more impact nowadays simply to look an audience in the eye and speak to them directly. There's no whizz-bang in PowerPoint any more. We've seen it all before.

That doesn't mean it shouldn't be used, or that it can't be helpful. It can indeed be helpful. But no one should feel they haven't done a 'proper' job because they haven't used slides. A clear and compelling message, good delivery, simple structure, flow and conviction are far more important to get right. It's better to invest more on the structure and content of a talk, on selecting the right passages and having something good to say about them, on choosing an anecdote or example, and on ensuring the message is delivered in a convincing way. *That* work—and the Bible study which must undergird it all—should be the starting point and the focus.

After suffering a particularly long and tedious presentation, Albert Einstein was once heard to remark, "I have just developed a new theory of eternity"! There is no upside in torturing an audience. Better to be short and leave them wanting more. Better to have fewer slides and more message and conviction. A human being has no connection with a slide. It is just so much light projected on a wall. But when one person looks another in the eye and communicates a message in a clear and compelling way, then there can indeed be a connection. One can be stirred and moved and constrained to change (when did a slide last make you feel that way?). For all a direct talk may seem old hat, there is something uniquely personal—and therefore powerful—about it.

Mark Vincent