

A BIBLE FALLING APART BELONGS TO ONE WHO ISN'T: Metaphor in American Church Marquees

This paper presents the results of an exploratory investigation into the use of metaphor in a particularly American form of advertising, namely church marquees. These marquees are outdoor changeable copy or LED signs, typically located on church property but visible to passing motorists. They serve various purposes, which include informing the congregation of church events, boosting the church's attendance – and by extension- finances, and allowing the minister a means of influencing and/or serving the local community. Active users change their captions weekly. In essence, these signs are billboards for the Lord, one-sentence sermons (J.M. Stewart Corporation 2008, Rentaria 2005, Shafrir 2007).

The space available for messages on church marquees is extremely restricted due to practical considerations of traffic patterns near the sign (motorists must be able to digest the contents in a brief moment while driving by) and local zoning regulations which regulate the size of signs. Consequently, careful consideration must be given to the message, which ideally should be inspirational, thoughtful and/or humorous to attract the maximum amount of (preferably) positive attention (J.M. Stewart Corporation 2010, Verbrugge 1999: 13-19).

Deliberate use of conventional metaphor, such as the word play that frequently features in puns, newspaper/sports headlines, and bumper stickers, provides one effective means of fulfilling church requirements (see Steen 2008: 223). In particular, bridge metaphors, which exploit a “common boundary between two fields” (Kittay 1987: 275) by simultaneously affording a literal and metaphorical reading, would appear to be especially effective. Documented examples of such messages from how-to books as well as both online and coffee-table photo collections of marquees are replete with pithy captions such as the light-hearted *For a healthy heart, give your faith a workout* or play on words *To prevent sinburn use sunscreen*, the more ominous *Turn or burn*, and the thought-provoking *Aim at nothing and you will always hit it* (see e.g. Claassen 2005, Glusenkamp 1996, Harvey 2007, Paulson and Paulson 2006, Verbrugge 1999, Wikihow 2008).

This study is a corpus-driven pilot project, where a small corpus of weekly photos of church marquees has been collected in 2010 over a four-month period. Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal denominations are represented in the corpus, together with non-denominational Christian churches. The primary purpose is to shed light on the degree to which documented collections of church signs reflect actual church practice, focusing on the use of metaphor in the messages, in terms of both frequency and type. The study thus weds two areas which have been the focus of little to no academic research: American church marquees and bridge metaphors.

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