

Adjunct Reading 1
The Realities of Orality and Literacy In This Century

Oral Bible Forum
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Exploring The Implications of Orality, Literacy and Chronological Bible
Storying Concerning Global Evangelization

The Gospel is being proclaimed to more people than at any other time in history, yet many of those to whom it is being preached are not really “hearing” it. To understand how this failure is occurring, it is necessary to examine the dynamics of discourse. Discourse is a two-way street. Both the preacher’s presentation of the Gospel’s message and the hearer’s understanding of that message are involved. Dramatic differences in the levels of literacy between the presenter and the hearer can be fundamental barriers to effective discourse.

Only a few presenters of the Gospel have the slightest idea that there might be a problem. On the other hand, most of the hearers affected by the problem know there is a problem. Caught by this problem are the oral communicators of this world — illiterates, functional illiterates, and semi-literates — and those church leaders who preach and minister to them. Even worse, over 90% of the world’s ministers are literates who use expositional formats when presenting the Gospel. When the Gospel is presented to an oral communicator using the literate’s expositional means of communication, it is seldom “heard.” To be “heard,” the communicator must package the Gospel in a narrative, or story format. That is the format oral communicators understand and identify. Because a remembered story can and will be retold, the story format also provides the oral communicator with a means of communication. Expositional formats such as outlines, steps, precepts, principles, teachings, lists, and similar constructions are seldom understood by oral communicators. Even less can they remember them.

At least three and one-half billion (60%) of the world’s 6.1 billion people are oral communicators. At least one-fourth of the world’s population (1,525,383,804 people) are primary oral communicators — illiterates.¹ **Primary oral communicators cannot read or write.** And, at least fifty percent (50%) of those who live in the United States are oral communicators and cannot perform literate tasks well enough to function as literates. Oral communicators are likely the largest unevangelized population segment in the USA. (See Adjunct Reading 3.2 and 3.3. for NALDs data on the USA) Over sixty percent (60%) of Islamic women are either illiterate or functionally illiterate, as is Africa south of the Sahara. **At least seventy percent (70%) of the worlds least reached and unevangelized peoples are oral communicators.**

Not just illiterates, but all oral communicators, find it very difficult to understand, internalize, and recall messages that do not come through proverbs, prose, or carefully constructed stories compatible with their learning preference and cultural presentation style. Their preferred learning and communication style, or format, is the oral narrative. If they are to “hear” the Gospel of Christ it must come to them through a narrative format.

Well-meaning ministers and missionaries assume that anybody, even a child, can understand simple outlines of the Gospel passages they use to present Christ’s Gospel. Social, anthropological, and linguistic research reveal that is a misconception. **Primary oral communicators do not understand the Gospel when it is presented to them by means of**

¹David Barrett, Our Globe and How to Reach It (Birmingham, Alabama: New Hope, 1990), 25 and 28.

expository outlines, principles, precepts, steps, and logically developed discourses.²

When this miss-matched communication between literates and oral communicators occurs, and the oral communicator attempts to embrace the literate message, serious syncretism results between what is being heard and what they already believe. Even if they do understand, and "get the message straight," they are helpless when faced with the need to remember and reproduce what they heard. Oral communicators — illiterate, functionally illiterate, and some semi-literates — use different means of constructing, internalizing, recalling, and reproducing information and beliefs than do literates. An oral communicator's patterns are the exact opposite of literate, word-culture patterns. **Most ministers and missionaries have never been confronted with, much less faced these issues.** Consequently, at least one-third to one-half of the world's people have few advocates who understand their plight and who are working to communicate Christ's message in culturally-compatible formats.

Among literate learners and communicators, who will dare champion the oral communicators of this world? Who is burdened because of the certain lostness of at least one-third of the world's people who are oral communicators and who have not "heard" the Gospel clearly even once? Who will dare minister to those who follow, without choice, learning and communication patterns that challenge literate, chirographic, and typographic methods of learning and communication? **Who has the courage to consider the consequences of scientific evidence proving that oral communicators cannot understand and internalize literate forms of teaching and preaching?** Who among Christian preachers and teachers is called to become familiar with oral communication characteristics in order to communicate with non-book peoples and train others to do the same? Who among literate, word-culture Christians will attempt to revive his or her own blunted and atrophied oral communication skills to match the skills of oral communicators?

If ministers, missionaries, and other church leaders do not respond to the communication needs of oral communicators, as many as one-third of the people of this world will never "hear" the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is frightening to think that witnesses to Christ's saving Gospel could come face to face with an oral communicator only to discover later that a literate communication format stood in the way of the oral communicator's understanding and ability to internalize what was "heard." The challenge to learn the skills of "orality" has staggering implications for ministry. I cannot help but wonder what might happen if Christian evangelism and prophetic ministry took form in oral expression and in faithful folk theologies."³

Tex Sample thinks that the issue is even greater than these figures reveal.

It is my contention that about half of the people in the United States are people who work primarily out of a traditional orality, by which I mean a people who can read and write — though some cannot — but whose appropriation and engagement with life is oral. More than this, I am convinced that most churches have a clear majority of their membership who work from a traditional orality.

When one moves out of the United States into most of the rest of the world, the mass of oral-cultures, both primary and traditional, looms even larger. Two-thirds of the people in the world are oral."⁴

²Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Routledge, 1991), 8, 9, 39, 42, and 123.

³Tex Sample, Ministry In An Oral Culture: Living with Will Rogers, Uncle Remus, & Minnie Pearl (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1994), 9.

⁴Sample, 6.

Demographers and researchers such as Miles Smith-Morris looked ahead years ago and saw the realities of our century. They had evidence years ago that global literacy levels would not improve appreciably by A.D. 2000.⁵ Also, at least 9,100 language or dialectical variants of those languages have no Scripture or portions available.⁶ Even if literacy were successful among them, there would be no Scripture, or Scripture portions, in their language for them to read. A narrative, chronological-storying approach to the communication of the Gospel is of an even greater necessity.

In summary, one can say that to the degree that a person is illiterate, the chance of that person “hearing” the Gospel of Jesus Christ diminishes. This fact is especially true when the majority of the Gospel communicators are literate.

Prepared by: Dr. Jim Slack
IMB,SBC

Excerpts from a Doctoral project document and from Chronological Bible Storying Manual
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⁵Miles Smith-Morris, ed., The Economist Book of Vital World Statistics (New York: The Economist Books Ltd., 1990), 210.

⁶Barrett, 28.