

That All May Hear

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*With many similar parables
Jesus spoke the word to them,
as much as they could understand.*

Mk. 4:33 NIV

Jesus knew the value of parables. Mark says Jesus used parables deliberately, in light of his audience and their ability to understand. This was one way among many that God demonstrated himself to be an audience-sensitive communicator. The very fact that Jesus became human shows God's willingness to meet humanity on our level of understanding. Jesus spoke the common language and used familiar objects, concepts, and communication forms to reveal God and his message. Jesus taught as his listeners were able to understand.

After Jesus returned to heaven, ordinary people spread his teachings and the stories of his life. Followers of Jesus are still telling his story (and his stories) for the sake of those who need the gospel. We show ourselves to be like Jesus when we seek to present God's truth in the ways that ordinary people can understand it. By this approach we model love, humility, and service.

The most understandable ways to present God's message are the ones that people already know, the methods that they have used for generations. In many places around the world, these favorite methods are traditional oral art forms. Oral arts include storytelling, music and singing, poetry, proverbs, drama and ceremonies. They can be extraordinarily effective.

Oral Methods Increase Effectiveness

Recent research¹ found that oral forms of communication were closely correlated with effective church planting among Muslims. Questionnaires and interviews documented the combined impact of (1) using the local language instead of a regional language, (2) having at least one team member fluent in the local language, and (3) using appropriate oral or literate communication strategies, depending on whether the host group is oral or literate in its learning preference. Oral strategies were singled out for emphasis: "... teams who understand the learning preferences (whether oral or literate) of their people group and

¹ "For the Fruitful Practices Track, 280 practitioners of thirty-seven nationalities and from fifty-seven different organizations gathered. They were from teams that had planted 738 fellowships, and they evaluated ninety-four practices that had been gathered from surveys of 5,800 field workers." J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008), viii.

incorporate this into team strategy were more fruitful (in terms of numbers of fellowships planted) by 340 percent!”²

Other Christian workers have reported similar achievements using oral methods with non-Muslim groups as well. Using appropriate oral strategies with oral learners leads to better understanding and acceptance of the gospel. It contributes to better discipleship. Oral methods are essential in equipping oral learners as leaders in their culture. Because of this growing awareness of the importance of oral strategies, The Missions Exchange, representing about 100 mission organizations that support over 20,000 missionaries, gave its 2009 Innovation in Missions award to the orality movement.

Orality Is Reliance on the Spoken Word

These reports raise questions: What is this thing called orality? What oral methods contribute to more fruitfulness?

“Orality” is an unfamiliar term. When I use it people often look quizzically at me as they say, “Morality?” “No,” I reply, “orality.” A simple dictionary definition says that “orality is reliance upon spoken rather than written communication.” Before writing was invented, everyone lived by spoken communication, thus by orality. They read nothing, took no notes, and never looked anything up.

A few small, remote cultures still know nothing about reading and writing. The scholar Walter Ong called such groups “primary oral cultures” and called their way of communicating “primary orality.” Today, however, most of the world’s population knows that reading and writing exist, even if they themselves cannot read and write.

People who cannot read almost always rely on the spoken word.³ They have to rely on the spoken word because they cannot use print. They are oral communicators by necessity. Oral communicators get their information from talking with friends and family, not from reading newspapers or magazines. They may listen to radio or watch television. Oral communicators learn by watching someone else do a task and performing it alongside him or her. They do not refer to written users’ guides. Ethnic groups where people live primarily by the spoken word are called “oral cultures.”

Many people who learn to read and write in school do not find reading pleasurable. They much prefer swapping stories, singing with their friends, using proverbs to comment on current events, reciting poetry, and discussing their experiences. They gravitate toward oral communication whenever possible. Many people do not use their reading skills regularly once they leave school; as a result their orality reasserts itself. Such people are oral communicators because of their cultural tradition and personal preference even though they learned to read. Tex

² Woodberry, *Fruitful Practices*, 221. Over 70% of the respondents said that they worked with oral cultures. See also the technical report on the supplemental CD included with the book.

³ Deaf people are a notable exception. They also rely on non-print communication, but their choice is sign language, not speech. As non-print communicators, Deaf people have many of the same cultural characteristics that oral people do: preference for face-to-face communication, concrete-relational thinking, strong group identity, etc.

Sample has called people like this “traditional oral communicators.”⁴ Ong uses the term “residual orality” to refer to this phenomenon.⁵ This is a very common situation.

I talked about this phenomenon in a university class that included an African graduate student. A day or two later she went to a midweek gathering of her church. Nearly 30 Africans attended the meeting; all of them were university students or graduates. When she surveyed them, all of them said that they prefer oral forms of communication. Their response is understandable: African culture is strongly oral. Its oral forms of communication are aesthetically and relationally rewarding, so much so that these Africans strongly preferred oral forms of communication over print-based communication, even though they were university students and graduates.

The Bible Anticipates Oral Presentation

The Bible arose in an oral environment. Both the Old and New Testaments were written during times when the vast majority of people could not read. “The literacy rate in those biblical cultures seems to have ranged from about 5% to 20% depending in the culture and which subgroup within the culture we are discussing. Not surprisingly, then, all ancient peoples, whether literate or not, preferred the living word, which is to say the spoken word.”⁶ Scripture shows clear evidence of its oral origins. For example, narratives make up almost half of the Bible, and poetry makes up about another third.⁷ This is not surprising, because both stories and poetry are traditional oral art forms. Proverbs and songs are also traditional oral art forms, and we find them in the Bible, too.

Both the Old and New Testaments indicate that it was typical for one person to read Scripture aloud to a group. Moses instructed the priests to read the law to all the people at the end of every seven years (Deut. 31:10-13; cf. Josh. 8:33-35). Ezra read the law to the assembled people of Israel (Neh. 8:1-3). Paul instructed that his letters be read among the churches.⁸ Several of his letters seem to have been dictated orally to a scribe.⁹ Thus, even the letters of the New Testament have more oral character than casual readers recognize.

Rev. 1:3 pronounces a blessing on “he” [singular] “who reads and those [plural] who hear the words of the prophecy and heed the things which are written in it.” This reference and the others remind us that most people in the NT era encountered God’s word by hearing it rather than by reading it. The only copies of the Old Testament and New Testament writings were hand-written ones. They were expensive and beyond the reach of common people. The practice

⁴ Tex Sample, *Ministry in Oral Cultures*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), ch. 1.

⁵ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982).

⁶ Ben Witherington, III, *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 1.

⁷ OT scholar Douglas Stuart says that more than 40% of the Old Testament is narrative, and that the OT constitutes 75% of the Bible. Thus OT narrative is more than 30% of the total Bible. If we count Matthew through Acts as narrative, then more than half of the NT is narrative. Because the NT is approximately 25% of the whole Bible, then about 13% of the total Bible is NT narrative. Based on these rough estimates, then, OT narratives and NT narratives amount to almost half of Scripture. If we consider Revelation as narrative, the percentage would be higher.

⁸ Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; cf. 1 Tim. 4:13.

⁹ Rom. 16:22; 1 Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17; cf. 1 Pet. 5:12.

of reading a printed Bible silently to one's self developed 1500 years later when the Gutenberg press made printed books cheap and thus widely available.

This historical review reminds us that God expected many people to hear his word proclaimed live, audibly. The Bible was inspired and written with that oral/aural encounter in view. In places where printed Scriptures are available, then of course Christians should also be encouraged to learn to read them for themselves and make that their consistent practice. Where Scriptures are not available, we need to make them available. But even then, Bible translation teams should keep in mind that the Bible is a book that God intended to be heard as well as read silently for one's own benefit. His word is for the ear as well as the eye.

The stories of Jesus' life and teachings circulated in oral form for a generation before the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were written. During that time eyewitnesses told what they had seen and heard. Christianity grew dramatically during that period; the church spread from Judea and Galilee around the Mediterranean Sea and into the interiors of Asia, Africa, and Europe. These new followers of Jesus came from a wide range of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The gospel spread rapidly, vigorously, during a period when the primary available means was oral transmission. Certainly the public reading of the Old Testament played an important role in the early church. Perhaps some eyewitnesses made written notes about Jesus' deeds and words. But oral transmission was critically important in getting God's truth out.

Ordinary believers were able to tell the stories that they knew. They used them to explain who Jesus was, why they were his followers, and why as Jesus' followers they lived differently. Though the Jewish leaders viewed Jesus' followers as "uneducated and untrained men" (Acts 4:13), his followers were remarkably effective. Led by God's Spirit, they went everywhere telling the stories they had heard and the experiences that they had had with God. Their example reminds us of the potential today for ordinary Christians to learn, internalize, and tell biblical stories as a means of proclaiming their faith. Those who have not been educated can still take a role in the Great Commission.

As the Lausanne movement rallies around a vision of "the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world," there are several implications about orality for it to consider.

Implications of Orality for the Whole Church

Much of Christianity's growth in the last several decades has been among oral cultural groups in Central and South America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. Their familiarity with oral traditions can be an advantage in making Christ known among those who have yet to hear the gospel, for most of those who have not heard the gospel also live in oral cultures. Christians from strong oral cultures already understand the value of communicating in story, song, proverb, and dance. They can share their expertise with those who are steeped in other ways of communication. Christians from oral cultures can advocate for the value of learning via apprenticeship in ministry, especially for oral learners. They can lovingly insist that the equipping processes for church leaders give full consideration to the needs of oral learners.

On the other hand, Christians from print-oriented cultures and church traditions need to develop a greater appreciation for and skill in the use of various oral communication approaches. Part of this shift is attitudinal; it involves valuing oral arts in Scripture and in cultures. This shift will frequently mean learning from people who are skilled in their culture's traditional oral arts. In partnership with oral artists, print-oriented Christians can discover what oral arts the culture itself uses and which ones are best for biblical truth. Most importantly, Christians from print cultures need to resolve that they will do their utmost to see no one is excluded from full participation in Christ and his church for lack of literacy.

Implications of Orality for the Whole Gospel

Our desire to communicate Scripture's message among oral peoples can give us a fresh appreciation for parts of the Bible that we may have neglected. If we have focused much of our time on the NT letters, it can give us a new appreciation for OT narrative, the Gospels, and Acts. We may learn to fit the teachings of the NT epistles into the story line of Acts in a way that benefits our understanding of both of them while making them more accessible to oral learners. Serving among traditional oral communicators may heighten our appreciation for Psalms, Proverbs, and the poetic portions of the Bible. If we develop a broader and more intimate acquaintance with the whole of Scripture, that cannot but improve our grasp of the whole gospel.

Our concern for the whole gospel has practical implications for making the gospel available to those who have never heard. It means that any initial panorama of Bible stories needs to be selected carefully so that the collected stories include the essential theological themes. It also means that we must seek to understand every culture where we proclaim Christ. The more fully we want the whole gospel to influence a culture, the more fully we must seek to understand the culture; otherwise we may proclaim the gospel based on misunderstandings of the culture's beliefs and values.

Our commitment to proclaiming the whole gospel has implications for Bible translation and Scripture engagement strategies. Bibleless people groups in almost every case are also oral learners whose mother tongue is not written. In each language community, the believers within the group and their partners in Bible translation organizations will want to determine the best way to make the whole gospel accessible to them. Recent efforts to think more precisely about what it means to make Scripture "accessible" have led some groups to helpful reconsiderations of their strategies. Just completing and printing translations does not make them accessible to non-readers. Well-considered Scripture engagement strategy makes provision for non-readers and their media utilization preferences. Advances in technology have brought many new opportunities to present biblical truth via radio, audio and video recordings. Many of these have already proven tremendously effective in reaching oral learners. It is impossible to predict all the possibilities for wedding technology and oral strategies in the years ahead, but who can doubt that they will make a huge impact?

Bible translation organizations have begun giving additional attention to the orality of Bibleless communities. They have begun using Bible storying methods to introduce mother tongue translators to Scripture and ground them in the sweep of Scripture before they translate individual portions. They have found it very helpful to use oral drafting of whole narrative units

of Scripture. This process strengthens the naturalness of the resulting translations and makes them more understandable and appealing. Testing these oral drafts by using them in small groups has also shown promise in several ways.¹⁰ Getting more and more of Scripture available in accessible formats that serve oral communities well is a key step in proclaiming the whole gospel to those who have not heard it.

Implications of Orality for the Whole World

Taking the gospel to “the whole world” means presenting it in an understandable way to every man, woman, boy, and girl. Possibly a billion men, women and children are oral learners by necessity because of illiteracy or functional illiteracy. Possibly three times that number are oral learners by preference.

By UNESCO’s conservative estimates,¹¹ one adult in six, 759 million men and women, are illiterate. Two thirds of those are women (95). An estimated 72 million school-age children are not enrolled in primary school. Additionally, 71 million adolescents are not enrolled in secondary school. Thus “the out-of-school problem is twice as large as it is typically reported to be” (73). All these people who lack education require God’s truth in oral form if they are to understand it.

Many who complete primary school or more are still highly oral by necessity. Completing a primary or secondary education does not guarantee that students have functional literacy skills.

Millions of children emerge from primary school each year without having acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills. Unable to formulate or read a simple sentence, these children are ill equipped to make the transition to secondary school – let alone enter employment markets. The problems extend to secondary schools, where many children – sometimes a majority – do not reach even a minimal level of competence (104).

This is not limited to a handful of the most economically impoverished nations. “Absolute levels of learning achievement are exceptionally low in many countries” (104). The educational performance of ethnic and linguistic minorities is often worse than the national averages. Christians reaching out to ethnic and linguistic minorities should take note of this.

¹⁰ These shifts are described in more detail in Grant Lovejoy, “Orality, Bible Translation, and Scripture Engagement,” the Beekman Lecture presented Oct. 17, 2009 at the Bible Translation Conference 2009, Dallas, TX.

¹¹ See UNESCO, *Reaching the Marginalised*, Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2010 (Oxford University Press, 2010) for the statistical information in this section. The authors acknowledge that many government-provided statistics tend to over-estimate adult literacy rates (96-97), primary school enrollment (57-58), and educational achievement (105-107). For more information about the difficulties in measuring literacy accurately and for rough estimates of the extent of orality, see Grant Lovejoy, “The Extent of Orality,” *Dharma Deepika: A South Asian Journal of Missiological Research* 25 (June 2007): 24-34; republished online in the [Journal of Baptist Theology and Ministry](#) 5 (Spring 2008): 121-33.

Low literacy is not just an issue in the developing world. The affluent industrialized countries also have sizable populations with limited literacy skills. In the United States, for example, “14% of the [adult] population lacks the literacy skills to perform simple, everyday tasks like understanding newspaper articles and instruction manuals” (96). Similar situations exist in other developed countries. The International Adult Literacy Survey conducted in 22 nations and regions, most of them developed countries, directly tested participants’ literacy skills. IALS research discovered that almost half of adults in those countries had limited literacy skills.¹² These adults, who can read but who do not read proficiently, are a sizable portion of the estimated three billion people who have a preference for oral communication.

Conclusion

We seek to communicate God’s message so that ordinary people can understand it, respond to it, share it with others, and live it out fully. To the extent that our audience learns best by oral means, we must adjust our communication to meet them. Faithfulness to Jesus’ example compels us to this, as does the possibility of increased fruitfulness in his service. Churches and mission organizations worldwide have seen increased effectiveness for the past two decades as they have experimented with, and then embraced ever more fully, the use of oral strategies. People who had been marginalized in Christianity because they lacked literacy can now be once again full participants in Christ’s body.

¹² *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey*, (Paris: OECD, 2000), 17.