

## **Recovering a Sense of Orality in Homiletics** **Introduction—Caging the Wild Things**

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### **Abstract:**

The newer trend in homiletics toward spontaneity is actually very old, going back to the days of primary orality, before literacy had established dominance in the communicative arena. Resources from the world of orality (including metaphor, grounding in struggle, repetition, narrative structuring, classical invention, and dialogue) can serve to make the sermon a truly oral event.

In 1891 Thomas Edison and his assistant William Dickson stunned the world with a demonstration of their revolutionary new machines: a Kinetograph to capture a rapid sequence of still photographs, and a Kinetoscope which enabled the viewer to see, for the first time, those still pictures dancing in what appeared to be motion. Up until that point, action had always been vaporous and fleeting. Once an event occurred, it was lost and unrepeatable. Edison made action documentable and repeatable. Suddenly, sight had an archive of motion, and Edison and his technological successors changed the way we think about experienced reality, which could now be captured and domesticated.

Thousands of years ago, a similarly revolutionary innovation changed the way humans interacted. From the dawn of civilization, speech had always been vaporous and fleeting. Once spoken, words, unless memorized, were lost forever. But it wasn't the tape recorder that produced the first change. It was something even more innovative, but strangely routine for us today: the alphabet, developed around 1500 B.C.(Ong, 2002, p. 88).

Before the alphabet, sound could not be mapped. Though humans used language pervasively and communicated with precision and intelligence, nothing was documentable or even "parsable" by rules of grammar. It is almost impossible now, having so long breathed the air of literacy, to imagine what it was like to use language that was not broken up into discreet units of words, syllables, and letters. Imagine using the sound pattern "Get-me-that-cup" without conceiving the four separate words and their corresponding letters. It is almost impossible to think of the word "cup" without "seeing" the letters "c-u-p." But in earlier civilizations (earlier, but no less intelligent), the phoneme/word "cup" was only a noise, a patterned sound. "It" (the word, not the actual cup) did not exist anywhere else. This is what linguistic historians call a society of primary orality.

But as civilizations became more organized and centrally-governed, documentation became necessary. Starting as scratches and then pictographs, early scribes transferred concepts onto various writing surfaces to log payments, inventories, and invoices. Eventually they became more proficient at using symbols to stand for whole syllables (combining, in modern English equivalence, a symbol for a dog and an adjacent symbol for mother to forge and render the word “dogma,” (which has no relation to dogs or motherhood)).<sup>1</sup> Signs on paper were starting to lose their tight correspondence with actual physical items and adopt a looser more symbolic connotation. Symbols were starting to encompass complex and abstract ideas. But the real breakthrough was the alphabet.

Immersed as we are in literacy, we seldom think how revolutionary the alphabet was. Starting with the Semetic alphabet of consonants, and expanding with the Greek addition of vowels, the tools were in place to accurately map vocal sound (phonemes). For the first time, sounds could be mapped and transferred economically and accurately. With a wonderfully simple collection of roughly 20 alphabetic letters, almost any noise the human mouth could enunciate could be mapped and replicated. For the first time, people could mouth words they didn’t personally conceive. Until that point, every speaker was an author. Now speakers, without any memorization, could ape the words of others, and audiences were confronted, for the first time, with secondhand (even borrowed or plagiarized) thoughts. Suddenly, sound--words-- had an archive, and human thought and communicative interaction would never be the same.

Plato did a considerable amount of hang-wringing over this innovation. Although scholars have concluded that, ironically, Plato was responsible for a good deal of the shift toward abstract literate ways of thought<sup>2</sup>, he also harbored grave misgivings about literacy. In a sort of double irony, we only know of these misgivings about writing because he chose to document those misgivings in writing.

Once a thing is put in writing, the composition... drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn’t know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused, it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself (Plato’s *Phaedrus* 158).

Ong elaborates these dangers by pointing to literacy’s tendency to separate knower from known. When this paper is finished, it can sit alone on a table, apparently alone and anonymous, ideas occupying space. Its author can say, “Where’s my paper?” and someone can reply “Right there on the table” in a way they never could in primary orality. It lives “out there” unnaturally exterior to me. In older times the question would

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<sup>1</sup> The technical term for this use of pictographs is “rebus” writing. See chapter 4 in Ong’s *Orality and Literacy*, or Thomas Bertonneau’s *Orality, Literacy and the Tradition* for a concise historical overview of the development of the alphabet.

<sup>2</sup> Ong quotes Havelock extensively on the point of Plato’s ironic undermining of orality even as he celebrated it (*Orality and Literacy* 79). Bertonneau illustrates it thoroughly in the dialogue with the sophist Protagoras (116).

have made no sense. “Where are my ideas?” “In your head. In your mind. In your mouth.” Even, “In your memory.” But not, “On the table.” Ideas cannot live on a table.

Ong’s point is that literacy literally remaps our thinking patterns toward abstract and extended modes of thought. It is not as if a text is merely literate until it is read aloud, at which point it becomes oral. Its very structure during composition will be radically different depending on whether it was produced out of a context of orality or literacy.

At the end of Ong’s monumental and oft-quoted work, he lists areas of study that could be affected and/or informed by his understanding of this creative tension between orality and literacy. The list includes the usual suspects: Literary Theory, New Criticism, Structuralism, Deconstruction, Reader-Response Theory, and finally Social Science, Philosophy and Biblical Studies. Yet oddly enough, this Jesuit priest who preached on a regular basis for most of his life, never mentions connections between orality and homiletics. Such will be the line of inquiry for this paper. How would an understanding of the issue of orality/literacy inform the praxis of preaching (an undeniably oral event grounded in literacy)? Since Ong and other scholars of orality offer scant elaboration, the following suppositions will attempt to apply his groundwork to the tasks common to all preachers.

### **Expositional Literacy**

Though not all preachers would describe themselves as “expositional,” almost all would acknowledge that the homiletic task is some sense grounded in the biblical text. So literacy is an unavoidable and appropriate as a starting point. If God is going to reveal himself through language, it would make sense that he would encode the revelation in literacy with its notable competence in accuracy, precision, transferability. That literacy has such strengths, no one disputes. Even proponents of orality extol the superiority of literacy for many linguistic tasks. Note Ong’s eloquent summary.

Orality is not an ideal, and never was. To approach it positively is not to advocate it as a permanent state for any culture. Literacy opens possibilities to the word and to human existence unimaginable without writing. Oral cultures today value their oral traditions and agonize over the loss of these traditions, but I have never encountered or heard of an oral culture that does not want to achieve literacy as soon as possible (Ong, 2002, p. 171).

So much for the idea of returning to a golden age of primary orality. Ong clearly has no such agenda. Bertonneau draws out the supremacy of literacy in his analysis of Plato’s dialogue with Protagoras. Protagoras has trouble matching wits with his more logical and literate counterpart. Whereas Protagoras is accustomed to getting by with story-telling and sophistic surface argument, Socrates slices and dices his opponent by detailed exposition of the poem they are mutually discussing. For Bertonneau, Socrates’ arguments betray an extended form of argument made possible only with the precision of

literacy. (116).<sup>3</sup> Such precision comes in handy for any world view grounded in sacred text. Though the scriptures were originally delivered and recorded in a world where orality and literacy overlapped<sup>4</sup>, its commitment to alphabetic documentation would render literacy a necessary skill for every generation (after the original) to enjoy access to that text.

Douglas Burton-Christie examines early monastic practice to get a feel for the relationship of orality and literacy in the copying of scriptural manuscripts. According to Burton-Christie, hermetic monks privileged orality despite their long hours of dedication to the chirographic task. In their actual practice, they seemed to value learning through dialogue rather than learning through intellectual speculation. They were aware of the danger of a disembodied word. “In such a setting we find both a growing facility with literacy and a residual uneasiness toward the culture of textuality” (Burton-Christie, 2001, p. 207).

### **Preaching Today**

Today, however, the tables seem to have turned. Rather than monks grounded in orality forced by necessity to indulge in literacy, contemporary preachers seem quite grounded in literacy, forced every Sunday to dabble in a bit of orality called “the sermon.” Like yesterday’s monks both skills are required in the office of preacher. But the balance of power seems to have shifted. Preaching has become dominated by literacy in almost every tradition of preaching, regardless of the denomination of the church or the education of the pastor.

In the high church tradition, preaching is dominated by the liturgy, itself highly literate. The sermon is ensconced between pages of readings and recitations, all regulated by the omnipresent and continuously consulted liturgical notebook, in many respects functioning like a book of spells, holding the key to the authorized incantations. In lower church traditions, the sermon enjoys a more privileged status, often dominating the rest of the service. Yet it is no less literate than its high church counterpart. Surrounded by stacks of commentaries and popular books, the homiletician emerges from his private sanctuary of preparation with an extensive list of notes (or even a manuscript) on the scriptural text, which he then “delivers” to the assembled masses.

In both cases, high or low, literacy wins the day. Even the word “exposition” is interesting in its common use to describe the practice of preaching. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word as “The action of putting, or the condition of being put, out

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<sup>3</sup> Bertonneau’s argument only holds up if we assume that Plato’s narration of the dialogue was massaged, revised and extended in the process of becoming literate. If it is a word-for-word transcription, the dialogue only illustrates the wonderful complexity of thought available to spontaneous interlocution, and perhaps, Socrates’ more agile and facile mind. Platonic dialogues can be summoned to testify on either side of the literacy/orality debate.

<sup>4</sup> See Susan Niditch’s *Oral World and Written Word* (John Knox Press, 1996) for a detailed guess at both oral and written backgrounds to the composition of the Law, The Prophets, and the Writings. Rejecting Source Criticism as grounded in literary bias, she attempts to track down and demonstrate the “interplay” of orality and literacy as a better explanation of their present condition.

of a place; expulsion.” It is also used to describe, in ancient societies, the practice of abandoning an unwanted child to death. More common usage is reflected in the third definition, “The action of putting out to public view; an instance of this; a display, show, exposure” (OED). In all three cases, the expositor is in complete control over the material for exposition. There is a tone of mastery and dominance, even death. So how did such a word become used to describe the act of preaching a sermon? Just what is being exposed in a sermon? Allegedly, it is the word of God. But it often becomes an exposition of the preacher’s intellect and, according to the dictates of literacy, a finished word, ready to “throw out” or “display.” It is disembodied and well under control.

Metaphorically, the literate preacher is the hunter, the forest is the scriptural text. The sermon is the prey hidden in the forest. Once captured, the sermon is field-dressed in study before the exposition of its carcass in the skeletal outline. With electronic assistance, the outline is then projected onto the wall with PowerPoint precision so every bone of the word can be exposed to the duly impressed audience. Much like mounting the conquered savage beast on the wall of the hunting lodge, the preacher mounts or “exposes” his skewered word on the wall, giving new meaning to the expression “six-point sermon.”

Is this really what should describe preaching? Does the literacy of the scriptural text require a literate “exposition” of that text? Or has the preacher in such a case confused the nature of his source material with the nature of his presentation? Does the written Word necessitate a literate sermon?

A preacher must be careful before committing too completely to the relative strengths and weaknesses of literacy. The very strength of literacy in accurate preservation and transmission quickly becomes a weakness for the sermon, which lacks the authority and infallibility of its scriptural counterpart<sup>5</sup>. Flawed sermon notes and outlines preserve inaccuracies for future sermons and future audiences, often taking on the same authoritative aura as the scripture text itself. Bauml calls this false sense of literary credibility “documentary reality” (Bauml, 1997, p. 46) and argues it endows discourse with a “factual” and “objective” sense that is absent in the unfolding of oral discourse. Literacy disguises the sense that a “fact” on paper is no more credible than the person who penned it, all appearances to the contrary. Perhaps parallel is the false sense of credibility granted by word processors and laser printers to otherwise mediocre term papers. Print claims authority- legitimate or not.

When the study and teaching of scripture becomes dominated by literacy, there may be unfortunate consequences, especially when those forces meet the less galvanized tendency of cultures still conditioned to think first in orality. Seminary students in Africa often do not know what do with the requirement to approach the text with pure literacy. “One response of the students is often to pay *lip* service [italics mine, should it perhaps be called “pen service?”] to Western biblical literacy and retreat into the safety of oral biblical literacy in their own worshiping community, safely out of sight of the professor.

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<sup>5</sup> This weakness of literacy goes back to Socrates original complaint of it being frozen and unable to reply to corrections and challenges (Purcell 13).

Three years of university training is abandoned the moment the student graduates” (Draper, 2002, p. 313).

Although western students and audiences are more at home with a literate approach than their African counterparts, their overdependence upon literacy in preaching can be similarly counter-productive (even though sound has made a comeback in recent days with electronic voice-dominated media, creating what Ong calls “secondary orality” and the consequent widespread practice of recording sermons to tape or CD or radio broadcast) (Ong, 2002, p. 133).<sup>6</sup> It is still standard procedure to prepare a sermon, which will be, when delivered, an indisputably an oral event, with almost exclusively literate resources, and then to expect that literate preparation to magically conform to the oral/aural arena where it has been sanctimoniously dropped. Ong calls this sort of orality, “chirographically organized orality” (Ong, 2002, p. 136), a sort of literacy posing as orality. There seems to be a striking discontinuity here.

What would it look like if orality was allowed to permeate the homiletic air? What if in preparation and delivery, sermons were to take on the not-insignificant advantages of oral construction and thought patterns? Would not this be more consonant with the communicative environment suggested by the act of public address? What would such a sermon look like?

### **Oral Preaching**

The phrase “oral preaching” at first sounds redundant. Is not all preaching oral? All preaching is presented orally, but not all preaching is prepared and structured in orality. Yet orality has an uncanny way of surviving even after literacy bosses it around. It survives in the margins of homiletic, outside established channels. “Indeed, the heroic view of a triumphant literacy pushing previous practices aside is being replaced by an understanding of the ways in which oral practices survive the challenge of literacy, and can indeed shape the cultural and social contexts within which literacy is adopted” (Innes, 1998, p. 4).

One of the places orality has “held out” is in the folk preaching of the black church. “Prevented from learning how to read and write, slaves developed a highly oral tradition of folk preaching. Black folk preachers could not own their sermons because they did not write them down. Instead, they borrowed sermons from each other on the assumption that everyone creates language, and no one owns it” (Miller, p. 121). Martin Luther King Jr. learned to preach not in his higher education at Boston University, but in the black church where he grew up. Because of his notable accomplishments, King scholars have spilt lots of ink dissecting King’s preaching style and are among the few to connect homiletics with orality. John Patton’s analysis is typical of these studies and will be used, in coordination with Ong himself, to flesh out a rough sense of homiletic orality.

### **Abandonment of Literate Reference Points**

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<sup>6</sup> Secondary orality is has many of the features of the pre-literate primary variety, but still “depends on writing for its existence” (Ong 3).

Patton is quick to note the increasing sense in which King jettisoned notes as he became more comfortable and grounded in his message. As a particular message or theme was told and retold, King gained a confidence to relinquish dependence on notes. “His young pulpit assistant, John Thomas Porter, was always impressed by how King would bring that text with him, but would leave it in his chair and ascend to the pulpit without any notes” (Patton, 1993, quoting David Garrow p. 106). Indeed his most famous “I Have a Dream” speech gained, according to eyewitnesses, a surge in persuasive force when King set aside the notes he brought to the podium. Mrs. King recalls that the final climactic moments of that speech were marked when “King stopped reading from the text, being lifted and carried himself in the overflow of powerful feeling” (Patton, 1993, quoting King, p. 117).

This is no small endeavor for a preacher accustomed to the reassurances and prompting power of the literate sermonic “script.” To operate without literate assistance requires a preacher to draw from something deeper and closer than abstract words on paper. It requires a certain “ownership” of the material at an experiential level, and demands the preacher have firsthand acquaintance with his subject matter. This daunting requirement keeps many preachers comfortably nestled into a literate preparation and delivery where the interpersonal risk is significantly lower.

### **Reliance upon Symbol and Metaphor**

Another hallmark of oral preaching is its extensive use of visual images in metaphors, lending concreteness and familiarity to an otherwise abstract and unfamiliar idea. King would title his sermons “I Have A Dream” or “I’ve Been to The Mountaintop” or with reference to “Moses” and the “Promised Land” (Patton, 1993, p. 112). Using already familiar symbols and metaphors draws the listener from the world of the known to the unknown, asking them to accept a new framing for an existing situation. Where literacy relies on the cogency of an extended argument to make a point, orality appeals to already understood relationships that metaphorically provide the missing insight.

People already understand what a dream is and how it functions. There is no need to explain that. But they may have never connected a dream with the fuel to provoke change in the here and now. The dream metaphor draws in the audience and does a good deal of the persuasive work enthymatically, automatically.

### **Grounding in Noble Struggle**

Borrowing from Ong, Patton identifies King’s speech as “agonistic in tone”; speech that “situates knowledge concretely within the human lifeworld and, most importantly, in the context of a struggle, a dynamic polarization of the world of good and evil” (Patton, 1993, p. 112).<sup>7</sup> Anchoring a sermon in agonistic struggle pulls the audience toward

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<sup>7</sup> Patton collapses Ong’s nine “psychodynamics of orality” in his homiletic analysis, sensing their overlap and the fact that some do not appear as relevant to the study of preaching. Still, Ong’s influence is pervasive and should be seen as the grounding behind Patton’s study.

identification with the speaker and the message. When a preacher accurately describes and intimates familiarity with the struggles of the parishioner, they are irresistibly drawn toward participation, sensing a stake in the yet undecided outcome.

Patton marries Walter Fisher's understanding of narrative rationality to build this agonistic identification. "The operative principle of narrative rationality is identification rather than deliberation" (Patton, quoting Fisher 125). An orally structured sermon will tend to say less of, "This is my point" and more of "This is our challenge. This is our struggle."

### **Episodic Narrative Structuring**

Orality and narrative are often connected. But when Ong makes the connection he has a particular kind of narrative in mind. Distinguished from what he calls the narrative of a "climactic linear plot" possible only in literacy, Ong describes oral narrative as epic and episodic (Ong, 2002, p. 141). That is, it doesn't attempt to construct an elaborate and interconnected linear plot with precise chronological timings (as in a detective novel). Instead, the epic poet would naturally drop the listener "*in media res*" (Ong, 2002, p. 141), or "in the middle of things."

A sermon structured around episodic narrative is not actually a carefully-crafted long story that is released scene by scene. It is connected more thematically than chronologically (as is a good deal of scriptural narrative) and feels free to flash both backward and forward, with timed sequence at the service of theme. Connected episodes carry the story, and each episode illustrates the central theme.

This is important for homiletic application. If a preacher understands a narrative structure to mean that her sermon begins with "Once upon a time" and stays in a singular story line until a climactic end, the discontinuity with traditional preaching will be so great, that entire narrative project will be dismissed as "mere" storytelling, and a task unworthy of the serious exegete. Yet this same preacher might be convinced to consider stringing together interconnected and reinforcing episodes on a common theme to form a consistent "story."

### **Redundancy as Reinforcement**

Ong describes repetition as a necessary feature of orality. In literacy, repetition is not as important because the reader can always go back and check a text if something is unclear or forgotten. The progression of thought can unfold quickly since the reader is in control of how fast the material comes (Ong, 2002, p. 40). Not so in orality. Complex ideas must be approached repeatedly and with different nuances, giving the listener's mind a chance to catch it on a second or third pass. "Since redundancy characterized oral thought and speech, it is in a profound sense more natural to thought and speech than is sparse linearity" (Ong, 2002, p. 40).

Listen to actual conversations and hear a tremendous amount of redundancy, prompted both by a desire to clarify another's ideas, and by a need to clarify one's own. For it is in speaking that we sometimes find out what we mean. But is an inexact process of trying out ideas live, in the moment. Unless we face a situation of extreme duress, we rarely rehearse interactions ahead of time, but allow them to spill out in a mutual series of testing and clarification. Oral preaching will have this kind of natural redundancy. But preachers attempting an oral style should be cautioned against using the actual sermon to "find out what they mean." Such testings and refinements can be done before the sermon, during preparation, to eliminate redundancy caused by tentative or conflicted ideas. Sermons that have been spoken several times before actual delivery benefit from natural fluency forged in the rehearsal of ideas. Redundancy in such cases will serve as reinforcement instead of brute repetition.

### **Interactive Mutuality**

Ong's word for this factor is "participatory" (Ong, 2002, p. 45). Patton talks about a sense of "mutuality." "The possibility for such mutuality is centered on the very nature of speech as oral sound" (Patton, 1993, p. 124). In either case the idea is that the sermon is affected by the immediate context of delivery and adapted in some way to the actual listener. The nature of sound is a factor here. It has the ability to penetrate in a way visual images, as refractions of light, do not. According to Ong, sight reveals surfaces, exteriority. Sound reveals essence, immediacy, and interiority (Ong, 2002, p. 72).

When the preacher is reciting a prepared text or flashing it up on a screen, although the words are delivered orally, the literate grounding is intuitively sensed by the audience with a consequential loss of mutuality. There is no give and take in the finished work; no sense of shared space. The delivery is monological and "outside" the speaker and the audience. It lives independently of them. Oral preaching, on the other hand, evaporates upon completion, and there is a sense of unrepeatability, of its essence as a product of the gathering, not of prior preparation.

### **Analysis of the Homiletic Task**

That literacy is important is not in question. That literacy is an important factor in preaching is not in question. What is in question is whether the resources of literacy or those of orality are more proper to the preaching situation. Bertonneau quoting Thoreau's *Walden* lays out the difference clearly. "The orator yields to the inspiration of a transient occasion, and speaks to those who can hear him. But the writer, whose more equable life is his occasion, speaks to all who in any age can understand him." (117). Is the preacher speaking to all in every age? Then she should write and read her sermons. Is the preacher speaking to his specific congregation, from the scriptural text, to their specific situation? Then he should cultivate the resources of orality.

Common to all these hallmarks of oral preaching in a sense of spontaneity not present when literacy dominates. But it is really responsible to advocate a spontaneous homiletic? Do we really want preachers shooting from the hip each Sunday and spouting

whatever comes to mind in the passion of a gathered hearing? Are we advocating widespread rollout of a revivalist preaching technique complete with saliva spray and impassioned pacing of the platform? What about the myriads of preachers who are simply not comfortable “thinking on their feet?” Are they doomed to the predictable cadence of literate preaching? Can spontaneity be grounded, rational, and clear?

Of course it can. Otherwise every speaker before literacy would have been on the level of a raging lunatic. Primary orality had tools to regulate oratory. These tools are very old, the product of millennia of trial and error, and were recorded in the process of making rhetoric systematic (written documentation of oral techniques). They were designed to balance spontaneity with rationality. Although a thorough listing of them is beyond the scope of this paper, there is at least one ancient practice that deserves brief mention.

### **Invention through *Stasis***

Invention was first in the Roman canon of rhetoric (the others being arrangement, style, memory and delivery). It is at the stage of invention, that an orator would thoroughly dissect the issue at hand. “Its mainstays, the generative system of the topics and the analytical system of *stasis*, were introspective, but their application was outward toward a variety of audiences and situations” (Purcell, 1996, p. 15). *Stasis* consisted of “a series of questions that determine the nature of the case and thus the required strategy. The system allowed the rhetor to winnow through the material of the case and decide upon the area of clash... In essence a system of *stasis* served to focus the rhetor on the key strategy and was consequently right at the heart of rhetorical invention” (Purcell, 1996, p. 16).

This sort of detailed and exhaustive probing of the subject and the circumstances was a process that armed the rhetor with enough grasp of the issue to speak with a sense of spontaneity. In other words, invention was designed to produce a highly informed rhetor who, prior to any public address, had been forced to think exhaustively about an issue from a variety of angles. This is in sharp contrast with the literate model of researching the commentaries for the authoritative word, and then transferring the correct interpretation to the sermon outline.

Extensive invention<sup>8</sup> is the price a rhetor has to pay to be equipped to move in the circles of orality with confidence and fluency and without the security blanket of nearby scrawled notes. This is the homework that is essential for orality to work, and should not be confused with a fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants style of spontaneous blustering. At one level, it takes more preparation (but fewer toner cartridges) to work in orality than in literacy. The literate mind does not have to embrace the content with the same level of expertise required in orality. The literate orator can always, and always does, make recourse to written prompts—encouraging a surface or stilted acquaintance with the

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<sup>8</sup> It would be interesting to take the classical modes of invention and apply them to sermon preparation; or perhaps to design new questions for invention adapted to the hermeneutic challenge. This is the ground where hermeneutics and homiletics meet.

issues or the parroting of stock approaches<sup>9</sup>. In delivery, the orally-based orator has a significant advantage when his intimate and personal acquaintance with the content lends a sense of conviction, Aristotelian ethos<sup>10</sup>, and uninterrupted eye contact with the audience.

### **Refinement Through Dialogue**

Another horizon for in oral grounding is the possibility for dialogue to play a substantial role in homiletic preparation. The world of literacy prizes the scholar's ability to work in private and deliver, at the last moment, the public word. Sensing the power of speech to refine thought, the oral preacher utilizes other significant people in the process of preparation. Once a preacher has previewed or tested ideas in a small group setting, with his or her spouse, with a worship leader or another pastor, the thoughts are not only refined in dialogue, but embedded with fluency. By the time an oral preacher takes the pulpit, the ideas of the sermon have already been pronounced numerous times in various settings. Far from removing all sense of suspense, the preacher gains the trickle-down value of multiplying the ownership of the sermon and the vested interests in getting those ideas out. It actually approaches a shared homiletic where those in dialogue sense their power to affect the sermon's delivery. More scholarship is needed to connect dialogue with homiletics, but the possibilities seem obvious, if not common.

### **Augustine's Homiletic Method**

St. Augustine, bishop of Hippo was a gifted orator, and often in the course of his travels was called upon to serve as a guest preacher. His method of preparation was to read and meditate extensively on the early lectionary scripture text(s) corresponding to the then current week. This served as his stage of invention and *stasis*. If and when he was obliged to speak, he preached spontaneously, drawing upon the meditation and invention that flowed naturally out of his study, and melding it fluently with the exigencies of the actual situation. "Preparation like this still allows one to say that Augustine, as any orator in antiquity, was mainly improvising. The only written assistance Augustine allowed sometimes to himself was the Sacred Scriptures" (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 790). Indeed, Fitzgerald documents instances where the lector "read the wrong gospel lesson and substituted another reading for the responsorial psalm which he had requested and prepared, Augustine on both occasions accommodated himself to the lector's mistake" (Fitzgerald, 1999, p. 676). He seems to have been in essence a walking sermon waiting for the invitation to speak.

"Augustine's concept of style is focused much more toward the experiential and oral dimension of language" (Purcell, 1996, p. 38). Speaking of Augustine's most overtly

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<sup>9</sup> In the process of documenting the variety of rhetorical approaches, the art moved closer and closer to literacy, eventually listing 64 rhetorical figures. Hence the tools to background orality eventually became the tools of literacy.

<sup>10</sup> Though Aristotle's ethos is commonly reduced to a sense of the orator's character, this is actually the adaptation of Quintillian ("a good man speaking well"). Aristotle is clear to explain that his sense of ethos is the credibility that comes from the orator in the course of the actual speech. It is the believability of the speaker as he interacts with content, not his credibility before or after the speech.

rhetorical work, *On Christian Doctrine*, Purcell concludes “Thus the hallmark of the first medieval rhetorical work is its view of rhetoric as a living entity that must be adapted to its purpose and time rather than as a collection of rules that must be memorized and imposed on any rhetorical situation” (Purcell, 1996, p, 39).

How many of today’s preachers have the deep grounding and intimacy with theology to be able to speak almost extemporaneously on the day’s reading? In one sense it is a daunting challenge. But in another sense, perhaps easier; easier if one was able to view all of life as a sort of homiletic preparation; tying theology to everyday practice, examining the interaction of the two from various angles and perspectives, and then working those angles through a process of invention and metaphorical expression.

One wonders if this is not the style Jesus used in preaching and teaching. It is clear from the gospel accounts that he had a unique style, drawing freely from the Law and the Prophets, but in a decidedly oral style; not bothering to document his teaching with rabbinic support. “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 7:28).

### Conclusion

The tension between orality and literacy is not necessarily harmful and is far from novel. At least since Plato and perhaps earlier, people have not chosen between the two as if they were mutually exclusive. They have mediated between the two, using resources from both sides (Innes, 1998, p. 17). Burton-Christie recommends the same attitude today. “Rather than arguing for the primacy of either the unlettered or the philosophically sophisticated, it seems that we should perhaps give more thought to the kinds of relationships that existed between them” (Burton-Christie, 2001, p. 221).

This document, literate as it is, has been pressed into service for the sake of recovering a sense of orality’s potential in preaching. In typing it, we ask literacy to undermine itself; and it happily obliges, documenting its own weaknesses in the process, and yet, ironically, utilizing its strengths as well. But the favor is returned whenever a text is read out loud; in essence, asking orality to come to the rescue of an otherwise frozen and lifeless word. After comparing their divergent patterns of thought and expression, they may seem like strange bedfellows. But they don’t seem to mind.

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