

The End of the Gutenberg Galaxy: Exploring the Divide between
Evangelical Preparation and Proclamation and Its Impact on Community
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Abstract

Evangelicals are missing the boat. Over 4 billion learners remain challenged with the burden of hearing and understanding the preached word of God. It is estimated that 90% of Christian workers fail to connect to their community of listeners from the pulpit. It is time for evangelicals to comprehend the task of healing our blunted and atrophied theological communication. To this end, I will discuss barriers and bridges to building community in a world of trending oral learners. Consideration will be given to orality and its effects on contemporary homiletics.

Introduction

Over five hundred years ago, the movable type printing press changed the world. For over one thousand years the Word of God had been held in the hands of priests in a hidden language. The people of God held the word in their hearts by memory and lived by the study of its fragments. The discovery that allowed duplication and distribution forced on the closed priestly system the liberty to study, translate, transmit, and transfer the Word of God to the people of God like no other time in the history of his people. From this period of liberation and persecution preaching once again became broadly known as the gospel-driven event through which God himself delivered in human agency a Bible-based, Christ-centered, message created for will-conforming, life-impacting, worldview transformation.

This paper will explore contemporary challenges facing evangelical ministry in a world of trending oral learners. Evangelical institutions train ministers who prepare to communicate using literate methods including linear, logical, or other analytical methodologies. In a world deeply influenced by non-literate communications, it is estimated that 90% of Christian workers using these logocentric methods to communicate fail to cross the ditch connecting to the audience, whether on the frontier mission field or in the local church pulpit. With over 4 billion learners challenged with the burden of hearing and understanding these methods of comprehending the preached word of God, it is time for consideration to be given to introducing primary and secondary orality and its effects on the field and in the classroom. To this end, I will explore barriers and bridges to worldview transformation of our evangelical deficit.

Progress or Problem? Defining the Challenge

The preaching of the gospel has spread to more people than any other time in the history. With innumerable resources, strategies, and technological development, the spread of the message of Christ has nearly limitless scope. Yet, to date there are 6,909 languages spoken in the world and nearly 2,400 language groups have no resource for Scripture translation. Of the 6,909 groups,

only 438 have access to the entire Bible in their language. If the Word of God is the ordained means of the presentation and application of the gospel to every listener, then too many have limited or no access to the grace of God revealed in his Word.ⁱ

The limits of access of the Word are perhaps more complex than mere physical access. Among those who have access to the Scriptures, many remain constricted in their level of understanding its meaning and implications. Dramatic differences in the levels of discourse between preaching and listener significantly affect audience receipt. From the early days of the Gutenberg press, the printed page changed the ways and means of education, preparation, and communication for those impacted by its advance. The spread of the press transformed societies and culture for centuries. An expert in cultural anthropology explains, “Literacy has molded our thinking, producing patterns of thought that seems perfectly natural to us, but which are strange to those in non-literate societies.”ⁱⁱ

Many, however, were never affected by the print-centered advances that literacy and modernity brought. In spite of the advances brought by the book, many continued to transmit knowledge primarily through aural or visual media. Literacy profoundly affects societies, moving learners from concrete thought forms to more abstract ones. Outside of the influence of books, communities shared knowledge, preserved tradition, and transmitted media through primarily oral means. The growth and proliferation of books pushed into oral communities changing thought patterns, communication forms, and the means of knowledge transmission.

In recent years, this shift has been exacerbated by the advent of wireless and wireline technologies and media, ranging from early radio and television to the Facebook, My Space, Twitter media of today. While the printed page transformed the systems that laid the foundations for the Western thought and progress, it never transformed basic, innate preferences for communication. In a word, humanity has remained a predominantly oral people.

At the end of over a half millennium of the printing press, less than a third of the world functions within the print-centered parameters of the educated West. Over one-fourth of the world is currently defined as “primary oral peoples,” groups who have no written language. Many mistakenly identify these communities as distant and removed from civilization, but some primary oral communities exist among the planet’s most advanced nations.

Beyond the primary oral peoples, over one-third of global people groups have access to written language but use other means to learn. “Secondary oral peoples” may be defined as those who live in a literate society but acquire knowledge by non-literate means, either by choice or ability.ⁱⁱⁱ As mentioned above, secondary orality influences the most progressive populations and as technology spreads communication into bursts of text, thoughts, emotions, the loss of depth thins the mind’s to conceive, construct, and communicate complex thought. Together, primary and secondary oral peoples total over 4 billion learners challenged with the burden of hearing and understanding the word of God. If we fail to understand their means of knowledge comprehension, then Christian workers fail to connect to their community of listeners from the Word of God.

Secondary oral people prefer learning through non-literate activity. As the reading of significant literary texts declines, secondary orality rises. Among highly literate communities (like an academic society), many are shocked to hear 58% of the U. S. adult population never read another book after high school. Beyond that, 42% of U. S. university graduates never read another book.^{iv} U.S. adults spend seven hours a day engaging in some form visual/oral (non-literary) media and less than 17 minutes reading of any form.

Understanding Audience Limits

While more than seventy percent of unreached people groups are limited by primary and secondary oral means, consideration must be given to the limits of the audience to which the gospel is preached. Understanding primary and secondary orality enables heralds to adjust communication models in order to exposit and delivery the meaning of the biblical text, the Word of God.

Degrees of literacy among listeners must be carefully defined to avoid missteps in reaching our community with properly prepared sermons. In this section, we will define and explore degrees of orality. Then, we will seek to understand better its effects on listener learning.

First, “illiterates” cannot read or write. As above, these “primary oral peoples” have never “seen” a word. For illiterates, the “word” is always spoken, never written.^v Among primary oral audiences, words do not exist as letters on pages but as sounds related to events, images, and experiences. Among primary oral groups, information may be exchanged exclusively through face-to-face interaction. To the contrary, our literate society remains immersed in the effects of written language. Blackberry, laptop, headlines, newsfeeds all affect the means literates depend upon for knowledge acquisition. Illiterates, on the other hand, do not possess the ability to utilize this technology as a means. While it is estimated that over fifty percent of Texans are within one of the three illiteracy ranks discussed below, less than three percent of Texans are totally illiterate.

Second, “functional illiterates” have successfully completed educational requirements using literate means but do not continue utilizing literate methods of learning after completing formal education. While functional illiterates may possess the means to read, as secondary oral peoples, they choose to learn and function through oral means. For the preacher, the listener’s functional level of literacy determines how they learn and develop their values and belief systems. For the functional illiterate, the listener’s worldview is shaped through oral means.

Third, “semi-literates” function in a transitory state of choosing between oral and literate means of acquisition. In the U.S., even though these individuals have successfully completed school requirements up to 10 years and meet international standards of literacy, they learn primarily by non-literate, oral means. In Texas, fifty-two percent of citizens fall within the ranks of one of the above groups.

Finally, “literate” and “highly-literate” peoples understand and disseminate information such as ideas, precepts, concepts, and principles by literate means. They tend to rely on printed material

as an aid to recall and worldview development. “Highly literate” learners usually have attended college and are often professionals in their respective vocational fields. They are thoroughly bookstore, print-culture, “big book” individuals.

What affect do these limitations play in the transmission of doctrine from the Word of God into the lives of listeners? Many who prepare for ministry do so by acquiring a degree, often post-graduate, which often leads to the development of higher models of communication. Our students are required to build libraries, read vast amounts, and transmit knowledge through highly literate communication forms in order to train for ministry. As they prepare for ministry, their preferred models of communication develop into highly stylized forms of transmission.

Preachers use the method they have learned, practiced, and mastered, but as we have seen above, communication preferences for the majority remains oral and distant from the well-developed method of the highly-literate herald. While training for ministry may necessarily include highly literate forms of knowledge acquisition, preachers must remind themselves that in order to believe in and follow Christ, they must first “hear” from the preacher. Understanding the constraints primary and secondary orality places on the listener must change the way the herald delivers his message.

Barriers to Effective Preaching

From the time of the Gutenberg Bible, Christian preaching has developed through literate means. In fact, Christians have led literacy movements as a result of the desire for Christians to read the Bible for themselves. Effective preaching involves persuasively and urgently communicating the message of the Bible to listeners who can understand and embrace biblical patterns of Christ-centered response. Biblical models of discipleship include instruction from the unchanging message of Scripture into varied and ever-changing audiences. Preaching necessarily involves the selfless act of discipling through worldview-sensitive means that avoid creating or requiring dependency on the disciple or his methods.

With the audience in mind, the preacher must prepare by first prayerfully seeking to understand more precisely the preferred language of the audience to whom he speaks. Once the language is learned the herald should employ methods proven to communicate effectively among literates who have at least some preference for learning orally. One example of this method and its efficacy may be seen in the transition to the case study model that drives graduate programs around the world, including Harvard University’s M.B.A. Instead of driving curriculum through highly literate communication models, professors teach through the observation and application of case studies. Using the concrete examples presented through case studies, instructors utilize oral methods to construct patterns of appropriate conduct for their respective degree programs.

The goal of Christian preaching springs from appropriate methods of solid exegetical and historical study into the presentation of the central purpose of the passage and its application to lives of the listeners. All other issues and concerns must be subordinated to the central task of preaching the meaning of the text. Preachers must bear the burden of understanding the method most effective for a sufficient level of audience receipt.

Concrete thought patterns are often considered too simple or undeveloped for highly literate communication. Instead of concrete thoughts, highly literate peoples deduce concepts and principles through complex literate discourse development. As a result, highly literate preachers prefer models of communication derived from those abstract constructs. Listeners with oral preferences learn through concrete thought patterns that correspond to situational and experiential models.

Models of these patterns may be seen throughout the Scriptures in the devices employed by authors of narrative, wisdom, poetry, and other genres. Instead of conceptual and principial models of the highly literate, the story of the text unfolds and the example preserved in the text serves as the forerunner to action for the audience. While highly literate models prefer the discourse of ideas, oral peoples prefer thoughts that correspond to actual life events. One reason many consider the use of illustration's importance in preaching is the bonding of the distant concept from Scripture into the concrete concept in contemporary life.

Second, oral listeners prefer the use of speech tools that serve to make discourse more memorable. Among the most basic of memory tools among primary and secondary orals is the use of memorable words. Memorable words expand beyond the word unit to include the use of employing cadence, rhythmic patterns, repetition, alliteration, assonance, and other literary devices. For centuries, preachers have used devices that aid in memory for their audiences to carry with them as they depart. Beyond the simple work of memorable words, oral peoples prefer epithetic expressions, thematic compilations, and other formulary expressions that are grouped or patterned for retention and recall. Preaching series, thematic sermons, and consecutive exposition through books all contribute toward meeting these oral preferences.

Third, organizational methods differ among oral and highly literate peoples. While literates often classify objects by the nature of the object in taxonomic categories, orals prefer the object's relationship to the experiential. While abstract concepts drive the categories of the literate, concrete relationship drives the organization of the oral.^{vi} Sermons can reach this oral preference by observing and applying elements from the passage as they emerge directly and demonstrably from the text.

Fourth, the worldview of oral peoples is inherently non-analytical. When considering the worldview of the highly literate thinker, complex abstractions define and categorize thoughts beyond the "real world," but the oral thinker conceives of a unified world where all problems are defined and solved through personal and collective experience. Examples of these experiential, non-analytical models include the use of folktale, folkart, poetry, myth, dirge, historiography, legend, proverb, riddle, praise song, and drama. These forms allow for one's worldview to be formed through history, past and present, historical and fictional. Before the development of highly literate models, worldview construction took place through genres that correspond to forms found in the Scriptures. Preaching that communicates the message of the text by honoring its genre and allowing it to affect the message, its contents, and the shape of the sermon.

Finally, the epistemic basis for oral peoples is biased toward the events of this world and their experience in it. Rather than communicating logic within the abstract concepts of syllogism and

other constructs, the oral learner communicates knowledge through related experience and historical models of truth acquisition. Orals are not illogical or pre-logical, but rather root their logic in experience, history, and other concrete forms that may be transmitted as experience.

Building Bridges to a New Strategy

As we understand primary and secondary orality and its effects, insights gained from research and collaboration leads evangelicals to reach more effectively the generations in our communities who need to understand and grow in Christ. We share a burden to communicate the gospel in appropriate ways that primary and secondary oral peoples can comprehend, apply, and reproduce the biblical worldview through discipleship. In order for the Word of God to take root in the life of the listener, it must be communicated through cultural relationships, using appropriate models of communication, addressing worldview challenges through the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching for a verdict of changed lives. As we develop more concrete understanding of orality and its difference from modern developments that literates possess, evangelicals must take steps to communicate more effectively to accommodate oral preferences. It is my hope that these suggestions could facilitate discussion that will lead to better understanding of the audience, the herald, and the medium of the Word of God preached.

First, biblical principles derived through historical-grammatical-theological investigation and interpretation ought to specify in simple and clear language the elements found in the text. Instead of abstract or complex analytical constructs, allowing the text to speak through specific, concrete terms accessible to listeners influenced by oral preferences.

Second, before entering the world of application, the audience's worldview should be understood and evaluated. As the audience varies, worldviews will shift. Differing degrees of orality and literacy should affect the means through which the preacher speaks from the world of the text to the heart of the listener.

Third, as the preacher "rightly divides" the text and its meaning, his study ought to lead him to the elements from the eternal that should lead to actionable change in the present. The central theme and ancillary elements from the text form the basis of his calculations that build the bridges from the world of the text to the life of the listener. Also, audience worldviews often possess barriers or gaps that the text of Scripture should fill. If the process of preparation includes understanding the worldview of the audience, then those barriers and gaps can be redeemed by the Word of God preached.

Fourth, as the herald plans and crafts his sermon, he should employ culturally appropriate constructs to communicate from the Scriptures to the audience. By focusing on the task of appropriate crafting, the herald should deliver the sermon through the observation, interpretation, and application models found in typical Christian expository preaching models.

Fifth, as the literate world trends toward secondary oral influences the principles discovered through the preaching event should be reinforced through repetitive exercises. Reiteration may

take place through subsequent studies or communications. One example includes reinforced application through small group studies through Bible studies of parallel passages.

Sixth, the preacher should establish accountability between listeners and the implications of the text. In order to implement the biblical text into the lives of the listener, oral learners desire reciprocal commitments from the text into their personal lives. This accountability from text to life provides concrete covenants between members of the community, including family, groups and other personal relationships.

Finally, because oral learners prefer concrete application that directly affects experience, they desire models that may be preserved and reproduced. Oral listeners expect the elements derived from the preaching event to follow with the reproduction of the sermon's biblical principle in their personal experience. Second, after experiencing a personal "witness of life," oral peoples desire to share those "principles of life" with others.

Conclusion

As evangelicals begin to understand the extent to which orality and its expansion affects listener abilities, we must innovate and adjust our methods to accommodate the world of the Bible to speak the language and connect better with oral learners of all educational and socioeconomic levels. As we understand how to communicate more effectively with the two-thirds-world, our adjusted methods can greatly increase effectiveness among highly literates as well.

As the herald seeks to contextualize his message, he must seek to reify his language, reducing highly literate tendencies to communicate using abstractions and taxonomic categories. Instead, he must move toward the use of real-life illustrations. Like the lost coin, lost sheep, and lost sons of Jesus' stories, unless our message connects with the oral trends of our audiences, then our sermons may be worthless salt.

By preaching from the text of Scripture to audience comprehension levels with the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) in mind, we may reach the fifty percent of the US population who learn through oral practices, sixty percent of the world's Islamic women, and seventy percent of the world's frontier/unreached/emerging people groups.

As interest declines in analytical constructs present in highly literate models of thought development, thought leaders will need to adjust expectations as communication models develop and deliver new media. Evangelical homiletics should emphasize the disciplines of building Biblical Theology, Expository Preaching, and the use of concrete illustrations, introductions, and conclusions that drive their students into preaching that practically affects the lives of their audiences.

For Christian preaching, that means the delivery of truth ought to navigate carefully the pass between carrying listeners upward toward knowledge and wisdom of the book of books, while negotiating the descent of literary culture and the mind's ability to grasp deep thoughts. As thought leaders set out, each must remind himself of the burden of leading both parties to the

Truth: one to the heights of His wisdom (Eph 3:18), the other to the new depths of human simplicity (Matt 19:14), and all in the same journey. The journeys of both parties must lead to the same destination, to the feet of the One who declared himself as the Λ and the Ω .

ⁱStatistics as of December 31, 2008 from Wycliffe International *Ethnologue* indicate 2393 languages without any of the Bible, out of the 6909 living languages currently spoken in the world. Dec. 31, 2008 statistics from the United Bible Societies indicate only 2479 languages have some or all of the Bible. Of these, only 451 have an adequate Bible, 1185 have an adequate New Testament, and 843 have at least one book of the Bible.

ⁱⁱPaul Heibert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 134.

ⁱⁱⁱFor an extended study of primary and secondary orality, its progress and effects, see Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London: Routledge, 2002).

^{iv}Statistics compiled by National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) study from statistics compiled in 2004. See <http://www.nea.gov/pub/readingatrisk.pdf> for more key findings.

^vThe word for illiteracy in the Indonesia language is *buta huruf*, which translated roughly means, “blind to letters.”

^{vi}As an example, see A. R. Luria’s famous use of the images for the hammer, saw, log, and hatchet among people groups in Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan. When the literate is asked to categorize the objects, the tools are selected and the wood remains. Oral peoples categorize the objects all together because the wood makes the “tools” useful. In other words, without the wood, there would be no use for tools. Because of their connection to personal experience, situational thinking, concrete terms, and experiential categories, no abstract concept of “tool” exclusive of the wood can be conceived.