THE RISE OF ORALITY IN MODERN MISSIONS PRACTICE

A Paper
Presented to
Dr. George Martin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for 86100

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November 30, 2010
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Introduction

It has been said that “the gospel is being proclaimed now to more people than at any other time in history, yet many of those are not really hearing it.”¹ Missions and evangelism involve the work of proclaiming the truths about God as revealed through the Scriptures, after all, faith comes by hearing and hearing through the word of Christ. The problem is there are some who are not hearing the message in a way that is understandable and applicable. The Western approach to missions over the last two hundred years has largely been driven by a literate approach reinforced by Greek philosophical and Enlightenment principles of logic and rationalism. The syllogism came to replace the story in evangelism and many tribes, tongues, and nations have suffered in the wake of what was perceived as the correct way to make disciples of all nations. Many Westerners had concluded that God was a God of logic, order, and syllogistic truth and the missionaries ministered in ways that reflected their cultural understanding of God.

A look to the Scriptures reveals a different picture. “God is a storytelling God. Deeper than this, God is the creator of story, and it is in the context of story that God calls us into mission.”² God asks us to realign our flawed scripts with the scripts of The Story. Modern


missions practitioners are beginning to realize that the truths of Scripture can be communicated in a variety of contextualized manners. Even the language used by missions practitioners is changing. Terms like “orality,” “Chronological Bible Storying,” and “narrative theology” are much more common today in missions journals and books than fifty years ago. This new vocabulary is a result of missionaries encountering what are today described as oral learners. Oral learners largely fall into one of three categories. There are those who cannot read or write, those whose most effective communication and learning format is in accordance with oral formats, and those who prefer to learn and process information by oral rather than written means. Orality is simply the category used to describe issues related to oral learners.

The rise of orality in modern missions practice is a fascinating study. This paper will survey the historical journey of orality in missions praxis. The paper will be broken into four major sections: historical missions approaches in oral contexts, recognition of the need for a new approach, a more fully oral contemporary methodology, and finally, practical ways to minister in an oral context. The scope of the paper will primarily cover the modern missions era, from about 1792 onward. It will be shown that missions praxis was driven by Enlightenment principles and that these principles were inadequate to meet the needs encountered in missions among oral peoples. A rethinking, including an understanding of orality and its consequences, was needed. Missions practitioners today understand and apply principles of orality in a much more helpful manner but there is still much to be learned as we seek to make disciples of all peoples.

**Historical Approaches to Missions in Oral Contexts**

A mindset commonly found over the past two centuries is that if anything is truly

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\(^3\)Durk Meijer, “How Shall They Hear?” (presentation at International Orality Network Meeting, Plano, TX, February 2008).
important, it must be in writing, documented, signed and sealed. According to this mindset, no merely oral word can carry the kind of legal, scholarly, or administrative authority compared to what a written and published document can. Western missions practitioners historically came from cultures steeped in written history. Graham states that it is difficult to overemphasize the perceived significance of writing. Western social scientists and anthropologists have made written language the major gauge for identifying a civilized culture. Noted authorities in years past have made statements along the lines that purely oral communication is unable to provide for progressive cultural development and that only writing can bridge a man from the tribal to the civilized realm.

A great deal of presuppositional bias can be found in the previous statements about the importance of writing. If a written language is indeed the mark of a civilized society, it is no surprise, then, that we find great emphasis historically by Western missionaries on the need for indigenous peoples to learn to read and write. The Era of the Enlightenment has had as much influence on missions practice as the Scriptures themselves. Beginning in the Middle Ages, the return to the ancient sources, their Greek and Latin languages, and their rational philosophy began influencing the thinking of modern men. Scholars found it difficult to conceive of any other manner of thinking and learning but that of writing and arguing syllogistically. The people encountered by many of the first missionaries had not encountered the Enlightenment, however. These people operated by an entirely different set of principles.

These traditional peasant villages were primarily oral. Their cultural heritages were

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5Ibid., 12.
passed down, not in books, but through generations of stories, songs, poems, and proverbs. Theirs were contexts tied to the power of the mind and the ebb and flow of the earth itself. Lunar and solar cycles, monsoon seasons, or animal migrations dictated when things should be done. Education was done by apprenticeship as the younger shadowed the older and learned the skills needed to survive. These primary oral peoples communicated, passed down historical information, taught, and learned, but their methods were very different than the prevailing Western approach of the 19th century.

The missionaries coming to these oral peoples felt the first step for effective evangelism was to build schools so the people could learn to read and write and, therefore, study the Scriptures so as to begin to understand God. Thus, if the villages had any schools, they were usually religious, built by the missionaries. The coming of Western missionaries and colonial rule changed everything in the lives of oral peoples. Those influenced by the Enlightenment said that education was for everyone, the only way to advance in society. People had to adapt and learn to read but the changes did not stop there. Oral peoples had to learn a whole new way of life, one not dependant on the seasons, solstices, plowing time, or harvest time. The written calendar introduced days, weeks, months, and years that did not match the seasons or agrarian lifestyle. The solar and lunar solstices no longer governed the year, rather marks on a paper told the people what to do and when to do it. Many Westerners thought that everyone, if properly trained, could become like the Western civilized world. Such drastic change was not so easy, however, and stories like the one below became all too common:

There was a small tribe, somewhere between Lake Titicaca and La Paz, Bolivia, that was a traditional oral culture. One day in the market, someone gave an elderly

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grandmother a book and told her it contained many things about salvation and could help her with her illness. The problem: she could not read. Upon returning to her community, she sought out someone who could read and they could only tell her that the book was a Bible, a book of the evangelicals. 7

Some missionaries were at a loss if they could not use the written word. The two hallmarks of early mission work, preaching and education, became literate affairs. A move to complete literacy meant that all preaching and teaching became based on the hearers having copies of the Scriptures. The method of preaching was dependant on the hearer being able to read and understand the nuances of the sermon, just as would happen in the West. Christian education was a natural follow up to preaching. Few missionaries thought to teach indigenous people in a way any different from the Western model. These two essentials to early missions, preaching and education, were driven by the Western literate model, as will be seen below.

**Historical Approaches to Missions as Seen in Early Preaching**

Even though preaching in the biblical sense simply means to proclaim or to herald, Westerners have redefined the art to fit a certain mold. A cursory reading of early sermons reveals that the sermons usually followed the written biblical text, which was carefully argued until a logical conclusion was reached. Based on that conclusion, certain actions were called for. The hearer was to behave a different way or make a decision based on the truth just delivered. “Preachers” were men of a certain mold and training, modeled after Western ecclesial structure. The writings of two prominent early missionaries help us understand some of what preaching was like in those days. Lottie Moon, an early Southern Baptist missionary, wrote many letters to

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supporters in the United States. Many of her letters contain examples of the type of preaching commonly found in China in the 1880s. After a brief examination of Moon’s correspondence, the diary of American missionary David Brainerd will be featured in order to show the literacy based preaching style of one of the most widely read early missionaries.

**Examples of early preaching recorded in Lottie Moon’s correspondence.** The style of missionary preaching in the late 1800s would be recognizable in both England and China. Moon describes one episode in a letter. She writes, “A Dr. Crawford did the majority of the preaching but when he was absent, a Chinese man, Wong, took over though he was not even licensed. After two months we had had all we could endure of Mr. Wong’s sermons and looked for another preacher.”

Moon and her colleagues expected a native Chinese man to learn to preach like the missionaries. Not being able to do so, they removed him from the job in hopes of finding someone more suited to their Western ears. Another excerpt from one of Moon’s letters reveals the following about preaching in that day: “One would have to be in China to understand the very great advantage it is in keeping a church together to have preaching, if only twice a month, by a foreigner.”

This excerpt and others in Moon’s letters show that Lottie Moon’s idea of preaching on the mission field should be as close to that found ‘back home’ as possible.

**Examples of early preaching recorded in David Brainerd’s journal.** David

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8Lottie Moon, Correspondence with Henry A. Tupper on 17 July 1885 [online], accessed 18 November 2010, http://solomon.3e2a.org/public/ws/lmcorr/www2/lmcorp/Record?upp=0&m=20&w=NATIVE%28%27text+ph+is+%27%27preaching%27%27%27%29&r=1&order=native%28%27corr_date%2FDescend%27%29; Internet.

9Lottie Moon, Correspondence with Henry A. Tupper on 10 October 1878 [online], accessed 18 November 2010, http://solomon.3e2a.org/public/ws/lmcorr/www2/lmcorp/Record?upp=0&m=22&w=NATIVE%28%27text+ph+is+%27%27preaching%27%27%27%29&r=1&order=native%28%27corr_date%2FDescend%27%29; Internet.
Brainerd is a missionary hero to many people, and rightly so considering his faith and commitment to the Lord. His preaching practice on the field, however, may not be the best model to emulate today.

Brainerd’s spirit of independence and eagerness to win converts allowed him to live among an indigenous, oral tribe alone. He was ignorant of the native tongue and unprepared for the wilderness. Some time later he made use of an interpreter but often attempted to preach in English. His efforts were fruitless and his life was miserable.10

Brainerd often preached and discoursed from lengthy passages of Scripture, sometimes for hours at a time. He writes that on occasion he was able to “open the Scripture and adapt my discourse and expressions to the capacities of my people – I do not know how – in a plain, easy, and familiar manner, beyond all that I could have done by the utmost study.”11 Apparently, Brainerd was not able to preach and discourse according to the capacities of his people normally.

Brainerd’s non-contextual approach to oral peoples resulted in a foreigner’s gospel and made his work slow and arduous. Unfortunately, Brainerd was guilt stricken for his lack of converts and was tempted to quit.12

The examples of 18th and 19th century missionary preaching above illustrate that preaching was little different from the variety found in England or the United States. Oral peoples had trouble accepting the truth claims that came along with the preaching, either because they could not understand the language or because the delivery was foreign to their accustomed way of learning new information. It is tough to discern just what caused a delay of several years before many of these missionaries saw their first converts but a lack of understanding of orality

10Ruth Tucker, From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 91.


12Tucker, From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya, 92.
surely was a contributor. If preaching was not done in a method understandable to oral peoples, neither was the education process the missionaries brought able to ease the problems.

**Historical Approaches to Missions as Seen in Early Education Models**

Education was a very important component of early missions practice. One of the first things many missionaries did was gather materials to build a school so that indigenous peoples could learn to read and write. Historian Stephen Neill gives a portrait of educational practices in the early to mid 1900s when he describes how

> missionaries would gather a small group of disciples and teach them as best they could but in such cases the intellectual level could hardly be more than elementary. More often, a group would gather for a three-year course in theology with miserably inadequate facilities and with only a handful of books in the library. When teaching had to be given in an Asian or African language, the lack of any adequate Christian literature was painfully evident.\(^{13}\)

The thinking was that indigenous pastors had to be trained formally, in the Western way. They must be ‘ordained’ and ordination required schooling. The writings of two of the most influential missionary thinkers of the day, Rufus Anderson and John Nevius, record additional insight from early education theory and practice.

**Examples of early education recorded in the writings of Rufus Anderson.**

Anderson, a man ahead of his time as far as raising up the indigenous church, still succumbed to the anti-orality ignorance of past centuries. He states that without education it is not possible for mission churches to be in any proper way sustained according to the three-self model he developed.\(^{14}\) Anderson understood a Western form of schooling when he referred to education.


Unlearned, illiterate natives are seen as having a degraded mental condition of the heathen world, as compared with the field of the apostolic missions. Scarcely a ray of light reaches it from sun, moon, or stars in the intellectual and moral firmament. Mind is vacant, crushed, unthinking, enslaved to animal instincts and passions . . . . The common school, therefore, is a necessity among the degraded heathen, to help elevate the converts, and make the village church an effective agency.\textsuperscript{15}

To Anderson, illiterate pagans had little capacity for knowledge or learning until they came under care of the Western school. He required a shift out of orality in order for a native man to be deemed a successful pastor. To these same oral peoples, Anderson writes that books are indispensable. In order to have the books, however, the printing press must also be present.\textsuperscript{16} The man perhaps most influential in alerting Western missions to the need for an indigenous church missed the boat when it came to issues of orality. Anderson’s system was not only foreign to the native mind, it caused the very issue he so often preached against – Western dependence. Rufus Anderson did not operate in a vacuum however. He was not the only missions thinker in his day to overlook the orality issue. John Nevius followed suit.

\textbf{Examples of early education recorded in the writings of John Nevius.} Nevius is well known for his training of indigenous leadership, particularly because of his “new method” of avoiding dependence by not paying most of the native workers out of the missionary budget. Nevius’ methods, however, like Anderson’s, led to dependence of a different sort. His method of teaching required converts to learn to read, follow traditional Western Bible study methods, and learn to sing Western hymns. Nevius only selected the more advanced church members for

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 99-100.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
his pastoral training classes. He does not say what constitutes an advanced believer but this method can lead to the unhealthy elitism where literate, Western-trained natives are distanced from the general population. The classes are taught to analyze the arguments of such books as Romans. Nevius goes on to explain that only one in twenty Chinese could read and not more than one in a thousand women. In fairness, Nevius had begun to catch on that these illiterate and oral peoples understood the stories and parables of Scripture much more easily than other sections but his methods ensured that only literate, Western trained Chinese would be able to lead the churches.

Additionally, the Chinese were made to learn to read Western music. They sang familiar English hymns, in the same meters as the originals, and sung to the same tunes. Nevius notes that “some have learned to read music but have great difficulty with the half tones because the indigenous music scale is vastly different from the Western one.” Rather than using the indigenous musical scale and forms of worship, the Chinese had to learn and adapt to an unfamiliar and difficult system. The great oral history, singing, and identity of the Chinese was displaced as the Western model of singing was introduced.

Nevius, Anderson, Brainerd, and Moon all advocated a preaching and teaching method that was Western and literacy based. All four of these missionary thinkers and practitioners were trained in Western educational institutions. These missionaries were ill-equipped to meet the needs of oral based cultures, largely because the West was so immersed in Enlightenment driven literacy and logic at that time. The gospel was going forth but just how

17 John L. Nevius, The Planting and Development of Missionary Churches (Hancock, NH: Monadnock Press, 2003), 51.

18 Ibid., 52.

19 Ibid.
successful were the missionaries in reaching people with a message that could be understood and reproduced? Written accounts of historical approaches to oral peoples reveal several uncomfortable realities and consequences of the Western approach. The next section will focus on these historical realities and show how they called for the recognition of the need for a new approach to ministering to oral peoples.

**Recognition of the Need for a New Approach to Missions**

The Western conclusion is that mission work in the 19th and 20th centuries has been largely successful. After all, have not missionaries translated Scriptures, published books, taught people to read who previously could not, and sent many future indigenous pastors to seminary? Yes, all of these things have been done but the truth is the “percentage of the [world] population that can be reached with useful knowledge through this kind of communication is still very limited.”

The majority of the people, specifically the least reached around the world, cannot understand and reproduce a literate approach. Anthropologists and social scientists began studying oral peoples in the mid 20th century. The results of these studies revealed that a move from an oral society to a literate society involved a paradigm shift. It is important to recognize that the discovery of literacy as a new paradigm helped missionaries to think more critically about how to approach oral peoples.

**Literacy Understood as a New Paradigm**

Previously, many people did not understand that moving from orality to literacy was much more involved than simply learning to read. The shift requires an upheaval of society.

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The printed word disconnects ideas and information from a known source. No longer is the message connected with village leaders who hold real and perceived authority. There is no immediate context for the passing of written information. Writing necessitates interpretation since the speaker is not present to do the task for us. All sorts of problems can now follow. Individualization of ideas arises. Studying and learning can cease to be a communal activity. Again, the Enlightenment has led to many more consequences than first meet the eye.

The end result of a move away from centralized authority can be something like what we see in post-modernism today where a reader response hermeneutic is possible. People feel free to develop meanings isolated from the writer’s intent, as they say no one can really know what the original author meant. Knowledge is now personal and reader dependant. The idea of personal, independent knowledge is a dramatic shift from the way oral societies thought of knowledge before the advent of literacy and writing. These potential consequences must be considered and prepared for if one intends to introduce writing into a society for the first time. Poor consideration of these consequences has resulted in the following problems as missionaries began to realize the implications of a literate society.

**Consequences of the Literate Approach**

A major result of the literate approach is that some native pastors are so conditioned to master Western theology that they have little to offer in the way of a native and original understanding of the Scriptures. Some pastors can only regurgitate what they read in Western textbooks and have trouble transfer their knowledge to the real world when they return to their home villages, if they choose to return after receiving their educations. Whatever the training

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and education, the truth is the vast majority of pastors and their people have simply chosen to remain in the sphere of oral communication. They remain a primary oral culture but now are caught in the middle between the old way and the new. They have difficulty learning the Bible because the primary teaching method involves written communication.\textsuperscript{22} In some cases, people began to believe that the ability to be able to read the Bible with a necessary requirement for salvation. Some mission schools had become so connected with literacy that some oral cultures began rejecting Christianity, not because of the gospel, but because they were rejecting literacy.\textsuperscript{23}

Missionaries who require emerging leaders to learn to read and use literacy methods greatly distort social organization and community leadership in many oral based societies.\textsuperscript{24} The recognized leadership in the community are usually older folks who are not the first to learn to read and be discipled. It is often the younger people that learn these skills and are more likely to be put into leadership roles, against the norms of the society. The introduction of literacy, in an attempt to produce capable indigenous leadership, actually disrupts the social structure of the village. Younger, trained people often do not know the oral tradition of the tribe as well and are ill-equipped to lead the people. The decades of literacy training have not produced the hoped for fruits.

\textbf{Uncovering the Oral Reality of the 21st Century}

Even after two-hundred years of literacy based missions, over four billion people, two-thirds of the world’s population, are still oral communicators today. In the face of the oral reality 90% of the world’s Christian workers still present the gospel in a highly literate communication

\textsuperscript{22}Klem, \textit{Oral Communication of the Scriptures}, 35.

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 39.
Westerners are still influenced by the Enlightenment and assume that God is a logical, linear, rational, analytical, and propositional being and they read their Bibles and teach Scripture accordingly. Cross-cultural trainer Sherwood Lingenfelter tells of the time he was attending an African church service in the capital city of Cameroon. The African pastors led a familiar service, sang songs from an evangelical hymnbook, preached a doctrinally sound sermon in English, and then dismissed the congregation. Lingenfelter walked away, having enjoyed the service thoroughly, but asking himself why the service in Africa should feel so at home to a white man from the United States. The current reality is that the world is highly oral and the West still approaches it in a highly literate way.

Contextualization is a buzzword in missions today but the orality component is often missing. Lingenfelter defines contextualization as recognizing the need to frame the gospel in language and communication forms appropriate and meaningful to the local cultures. His language aims at orality issues – those of language and communication forms. Communication forms, as seen above, are integral to the structure of many oral cultures. Who gives the message often carries more weight than the actual content of the message. Westerners have realized since about 1950 that many cultures are relational cultures, opposite of the United States and English independency. In a primarily oral and relational culture, there is high dependence on one another because all information is stored within the people themselves. Since oral communication is


28 Ibid., 15.
highly relational, a different approach to communicating must be recognized.

Oral communication takes place in specific contexts, as opposed to reading a syllogism found on the ground. Oral communications convey para-messages such as tone, gesture, expression, spatial distance – all things that ‘speak’ as clearly as words do. Proverbs, parables, and sayings do not just supplement logical argument as in a Western sermon, they are the very storehouses that contain knowledge in that society. The oral approach to missions is a totally different paradigm than the old literacy approach. Missionaries, their agencies, and their training institutions are recognizing the failure of a totally literate approach. Many missionaries are now trained in anthropology, intercultural communication, and principles of orality. The reality is that two-thirds of the world’s population are primary oral learners and missions practice must be prepared to address the issues that accompany orality. The next section of this paper will cover that very topic – the transition of modern missions to a more fully oral methodology.

A More Fully Oral Contemporary Methodology

A primary step towards an oral methodology must be avoiding the misguided notion that the greatest need is first for literacy for all people. The greatest need is in fact planting contextualized churches that are able to raise up indigenous leadership that can then reproduce themselves in other church plants. Oral cultures are not primitive or incapable of great advances in learning. Orality does not mean the people do not value knowledge. What is knowledge if it is not something that can be applied and transferred to others? The oral paradigm is capable of the task of church planting, evangelism, and discipleship. In fact, there are many advantages in keeping with the society’s preference for oral communication.

29Hiebert, Transforming Worldviews, 116.
Advantages of Keeping the Oral Preference in Contemporary Practice

Many oral peoples dance, sing, and share cultural proverbs as they work the fields. These times of oral communication are vital to reinforce the societal worldview and strengthen the cultural identity of the people. Robbing the people of the oral tradition by replacing everything with the written word will begin to drive apart generations within the population. Social structures within oral cultures are already in place and missionaries are beginning to realize the importance of witnessing to the village leaders before the children. It is vital to at least get the elders’ blessing before beginning any kind of work among the village but it is better still to include the elders in the process themselves. Keeping with the structure of oral societies aids in keeping cohesion between the cultural leadership and the training methods used by missionaries.

Another important point to consider is that many peoples take pride in their ability to recall vast amounts of history from the oral tradition. Several cultures have great ‘sing-offs’ where youths enter manhood through prolonged recitation of the cultural history of the people or by singing great songs that transition them into tribal leadership. Missionaries must realize the importance of such cultural rites of passage and their reliance on the oral tradition. Even if the missionaries wrote down all of the oral tradition, the verbal recitation of it must continue as a key cultural element in the tribe. The oral tradition factors into all fibers of the social structure within the culture. Missionaries are taking this tradition into account and far less needless alienation is happening with the coming of the gospel. Many agencies are making contributions

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31 Bruce Olson, *Bruchko* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 1995), 144-45.
to the orality movement, but none more so than the International Mission Board.

**The IMB’s Contribution to the Orality Movement**

The International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention has played a vital role in the development of orality principles in worldwide missions. Many of the discoveries and advancements in missions among oral cultures can be traced back to a select few missionaries who served with the IMB. The movement began in the 1960s when Trever McIlwain began to see the limitations of the literate approach to missions among his people in the Philippines. McIlwain developed what was known as Chronological Bible Teaching for those who were on their way to becoming literate. His approach was a hybrid of sorts between what is today known as Chronological Bible Storying (CBS) and traditional Bible instruction.

Around the same time, IMB missionary Jim Slack was also working in the Philippines. Slack began to compare notes with McIlwain in hopes to better reach and teach the oral peoples he was working with. Slack was not concerned that his people become literate. He was satisfied to allow them to continue functioning as an oral culture so he expanded McIlwain’s Chronological Bible Teaching and began to solely use scriptural stories to communicate the gospel and disciple believers. Slack and McIlwain worked together to understand as much about oral cultures as they could. Slack was an excellent researcher and took voluminous notes, which later became the basis for much development and teaching on CBS.

Another IMB missionary, J. O. Terry was head of the media ministry in Asia in the 1960s. Media ministry in other parts of the world focused on producing promotional videos, evangelistic videos, and other visually enhanced tools but Terry was mainly interested in how he

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32 Material for this section taken from Hayward Armstrong, interview by author, Louisville, KY, November 22, 2010.
could use media to reach oral learners. He had a fascination with what he learned from Slack’s experiments with storying as teaching. Terry began researching storying and contributed his findings to those of Slack and McIlwain.

In the 1980s Jim Slack had moved to Richmond, VA to become the IMB’s leading researcher. Here he began reading everything he could about oral peoples and their methods of learning. Slack’s research led to the IMB beginning to experiment more heavily with CBS among its missionaries in oral cultures. Slack met another man, Grant Lovejoy, a professor of preaching at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1995. Lovejoy’s specialty was in narrative preaching and he began working with Slack and Terry as their theological consultant with CBS. Lovejoy helped to develop storying as a means for leadership training and became involved with several oral seminary projects in Africa.

CBS became a movement within the IMB in the mid to late 1990s as Slack, Terry, and Lovejoy began training IMB personnel more extensively in orality and CBS. Hayward Armstrong had just returned from two decades of missionary work in South America, much of it working in leadership training of primary oral peoples. Jim Slack brought all of his CBS research to Armstrong and asked if he might condense it into a training manual for IMB personnel. The result was a published CBS training manual and several CBS training courses done through the International Centre for Excellence in Leadership at the IMB training center in Richmond.

Avery Willis, a name often associated with CBS, was actually more responsible for promotion than content. Willis was an IMB missionary in Indonesia in the 1970s. He left the

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field to produce the *MasterLife* discipleship series he is best known for. Willis heard about the success of CBS in Asia and asked Slack and others to produce a written and recorded set of the stories they used on the field. *Following Jesus: Making Disciples of Oral Learners* is the fruit of their collective labor. The audio set contains hundreds of Bible stories told by Slack, Lovejoy, Terry, and Mark Snowden.

Willis was at the Lausanne missions conference in 2004 and met with several leaders of major missions agencies from what was known as the Table 71. Willis shared what he knew of the IMB’s use of CBS with leaders from Campus Crusade, Wycliffe Bible Translators, and Youth With a Mission. The One Story partnership developed with all four agencies working together to plant reproducible churches among oral peoples. Willis was the catalyst for much of that partnership though he contributed little actually having to do with CBS itself.

Today, the IMB vigorously promotes the use of CBS among its missionaries. Storying and orality are taught to new missionaries at the Field Personnel Orientation in Richmond. Once on the field, the missionaries receive further training in context from their field supervisors and through regional training conferences. In addition, several classes on CBS are made available to the missionaries through the training center whenever they have time to take them. The IMB was at the forefront of the present orality movement, contributing many resources, both financially and experientially. Many agencies have taken the IMB’s lead and are promoting CBS and more contextualized approaches to oral peoples. The next section will examine several practical ways one might use to minister among an oral people.

**Practical Ways to Minister in an Oral Culture**

The progression of learning more about oral cultures coupled with advances in missions strategy has resulted in a conglomeration of orality based methodologies. Many of
these methods are hybrids or adaptations of previous literate approaches. It is difficult, if not impossible for someone steeped in literacy to fully understand and function in an oral culture. That being said, great strides can be made. Below is a listing of practical ways once can begin to minister in an oral culture. The first is a move away from systematic theology toward narrative theology. Secondly, an overview of Chronological Bible Storying will be given. Thirdly, orality based didactic teaching methods will be examined. Fourthly, apprenticeship style discipleship will be explained. Finally, one must consider whether to move towards a literate culture rather than allowing the people to remain primarily oral.

**Utilize Narrative Theology Over Systematic Theology**

Western missionaries are familiar with systematic theology textbooks. These books seek to take a topic, gather all relevant Scripture relating to that topic, and provide a logical explanation of the topic. The problem with this approach for oral learners is that the theology is divorced from its biblical context. Systematic theology tends to be abstract and philosophical rather than concrete and immediately applicable. One must connect a series of abstract thoughts in order to come to an application of the material. A better approach for oral learners is theology tied to story or narrative.

Narrative theology is described as “discourse about God in the setting of a story. It combines form (narrative) with content (theology) in a creative way that seeks to understand God and God’s dealings with people in terms of stories.” Theology is in the story rather than abstracted from the story. Much of Scripture is already in narrative format. God calls man to himself and reveals his salvation plan through narrative. The stories of creation, fall, Cain and

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34 Thomas, *Footprints of God*, 226.
Able, Noah, Abraham and Isaac, the exodus, Hosea, and on to the recorded stories about Jesus show that much of what is understood about God is understood through story. These stories are a powerful and useful tool for evangelism and discipleship among oral peoples, as the next section will show.

**Utilize Chronological Bible Storying**

Proper Bible storying involves much more than simply picking a story from the Scriptures and telling it to someone. The first step is to research the worldview of the target people. Missiologist David Hesselgrave describes worldview as “simply the way in which a person ‘sees’ the world.” Worldviews seek to explain such things as if there is a God, where humans come from, what causes sickness, how to cure sickness, what is food, who gets the food, what happens when people die, and what the afterlife is like. Understanding the target culture’s worldview helps the missionary know what the people believe about foundational things in life. Worldviews are made up of stories. The worldview stories are the contact point that CBS works with so well. The key is to begin replacing the culture’s faulty worldview stories with the truth about God and man from biblical stories.

Most CBS story sets begin with a story describing the world before it was created. Next, God is introduced as the creator and so on. There will always be certain foundational stories used in every culture but many of the stories will be selected because of their relevance to particular issues the missionary discovers through worldview research. If drunkenness is a problem, the story of Lot and his two daughters may be told. Many cultures worship idols of

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35Ibid., 33.

various sorts. There are many stories from Isaiah concerning idol worship and God’s judgment of it. Over time the biblical stories will construct a new worldview that is shaped by the Scripture.

Stories should be told chronologically so that the people first receive a biblical picture of God, man, sin, sacrifice, and the hoped for Savior so that when the gospel is shared, Jesus and his sacrifice make sense in light of the stories that have come before. Each story should be short and without added commentary so that the people will be able to remember the story and keep it as close to biblical accuracy as possible. Each story session should include a time of thorough examination with the missionary asking someone to retell the story to check for accuracy. Application questions can be asked and general questions answered. The missionary must be careful to not begin with an oral based story but then follow up with logical and linear questions. The goal is for each person in attendance to be able to understand, remember, and reproduce the story so that, eventually, an oral Bible of sorts is developed in the memories of the people.

CBS is useful for evangelistic purposes and also for discipleship purposes. For evangelism, CBS typically includes a ‘creation to cross’ story set of a dozen to up to one-hundred or more biblical stories. Again, these stories lay the foundation for the gospel, replace the faulty worldview of the target people, and provide an oral Bible for people who do not or cannot read. CBS works well with the stories that are already present in Scripture such as Abraham’s call or David’s sin with Bathsheba. Storying can work with more didactic passages of Scripture but the Scripture must be significantly altered to fit a story format. The next section will examine a method useful for teaching the more didactic and logical portions of Scripture,

especially the New Testament.

**Utilize Orality Based Doctrinal Instruction**

CBS can provide oral peoples with hundreds of biblical stories and set much theology in a concrete context. But what is one to do with issues like the Trinity or other doctrinal issues that do not easily fit into story form? What if Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses come along and teach about the Trinity in a subtly different way than what is orthodox? What about teaching through James? Such complex issues can be best handled by what is described as patterned drilling. This drilling can be done as a stand alone exercise or it can be combined with CBS for a more focused time on specific verses and doctrinal issues. The drills can be repetitions of exact scriptural phrases or short rhythmic statements about a doctrine. The repetition of words aids the oral learner to capture the concept and the key verses at once. The greatest difficulty will be for the teacher himself, as patterned repetition is uncomfortable and monotonous for literate people. 

Closely associated with patterned drilling is the idea to place theology and doctrinal issues in the context of a song or poem. Herbert Klem translated the entire book of Hebrews into a style of Yoruba song that could be sung. Klem then performed an experiment by teaching the book to those who could read by normal literate methods. Klem found that those who studied Hebrews only using songs learned as much as those who studied it using books. Many cultures have specific song styles that are suited for spiritual truths so the missionary would be wise to

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39 Ibid., 42.

discover them, their uses, and utilize them for teaching Scripture, especially doctrines that do not fit the storying model well. The orality based doctrinal instruction method is ideal for discipleship and leadership training so that indigenous believers might be able to soundly defend their faith against incoming heretics. The discipleship method itself must also be contextualized into an orality-based format, as the next section will examine.

**Utilize Apprenticing Style Discipleship**

Nationals need to be the primary trainers of their own people for effective church planting. The problem is, many missionaries who train first generation national believers attempt to do discipleship in a Western institutionalized manner that is not transferable to the new believer’s own people. There is a disconnect between the trained nationals and the local church.  

This move towards institutionalized training is a recent occurrence. Hundreds of years ago, Moravian missions founder Nicholas Von Zinzendorf implemented a type of training that was similar to the apprenticeship practice common in his day. If one were training to become a blacksmith, one would not receive the training in a classroom setting. An experienced blacksmith would take the trainee under his care and show him the ropes. The apprentice model is still the method many oral cultures are using today to teach younger generations how to hunt, fish, weave, and do business. Missionary Tom Julien suggests that missionaries would be wise to teach nationals the fundamentals of the faith and ministry in a similar style. Julien describes a series of “seed truths” that are best taught in a personal mentoring approach.  

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in the familiar relational context oral cultures prefer. The final component of this section seeks to deal with whether to move towards literacy or allow the target people to remain a solely oral culture.

**Consider Whether Oral Cultures Should Remain Oral**

It only seems natural that it be beneficial to teach all peoples to read and write. The missionaries have the power to do a great service for the locals. If the people can read and write, they can get better educations, better jobs, and create better conditions for their communities. The people will be able to have a voice in government and protect themselves from exploitation. These advantages to literacy sound wonderful. The reality is, however, that the move to literacy does not always go smoothly and is not as beneficial as one might initially think. Many Westerners would never think to consider that oral peoples would not want to become literate.43 There are two issues that deserve strong consideration in favor of allowing oral peoples to remain oral – lack of effectiveness and loss of indigenous leadership structures.

Herbert Klem reports that after more than one-hundred years of intensive literacy training in Africa, the number of people who can or will read to gain information is very small. In many areas illiteracy is as high as 95%.44 Countless hours and amounts of Western money have been poured into systems to create Western style, literate Africans. The end result is almost nil. As stated earlier in this paper, oral peoples have everything they need to function well in society. Literacy is not always needed and in many cases goes completely against the grain of all they have every known. Oral peoples have the ability to retain their entire cultural heritage in the


44Klem, *Oral Communication of the Scripture*, xvii.
form of songs, stories, and poetry. They have no need to write it down. Forcing literacy on such people, as helpful and necessary as it may seem, is not always productive.

The second strong case against introduced literacy is the loss of indigenous leadership. This topic has already been explored earlier in the paper. In summary, most oral cultures rely on village elders to be the gatekeepers of all cultural knowledge, rules, and heritage. When literacy is introduced, the elders are often not the first to respond; the younger members of the culture are. If literate approaches to discipleship and leadership training are used, only those who can read can become leaders. If only younger people can read and they are placed in leadership positions in the church, the whole societal leadership structure is turned on its head. Societal upheaval is not conducive to a contextualized and reproducing church.

So should oral peoples be allowed to remain oral? Does an oral Bible suffice indefinitely? Some would say yes. The author’s opinion is that the first generation of believers should be allowed to remain fully oral. Leadership training must be in an oral format, even if some of the leaders can read. Literacy should not be seen as necessary for any believer or church function. Orality should be the primary method for all instruction. Once the first band of indigenous leadership is set up, if there is a desire among the people, literacy can begin to be taught. Still, it should not be used to supplant the oral structure and teaching methods. At some point, missionaries and believers should begin work together on a written translation of the Scriptures. A written copy will help ensure the oral tradition remains faithful to the Word of God over time. Even though a written Scripture is produced, oral teaching and training should still be the primary method.

David Hesselgrave suggests that there is a place for literacy in an oral culture. He says the best method is to combine at least one indigenous instructional approach, CBS for example,
with some literacy approach, written Scripture memorization cards for example. An oral and literate approach can be valid and helpful when used together wisely.\(^{45}\) Hesselgrave’s idea has merit as long as local leaders are not \textit{required} to be literate in order to be discipled or lead the church. In summary, literacy is not the magical solution for fixing problems or helping the church grow in oral cultures. In fact, its introduction has the potential to cause more harm than good. Westerners need to have full faith that oral peoples already have everything they need to be effective church planters and leaders. It is the Westerner who needs to grow and expand his horizon to benefit from the oral world.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Seventy percent of the world’s population prefers an oral approach to learning. Modern missions has historically failed to recognize the unique needs of oral learners, largely because, until recently, most missionaries were Westerners driven by Enlightenment principles of education and literacy. The historical approach to missions reached many people with the gospel but it failed to reach them where they were as oral peoples. Sociological and anthropological field research began revealing the shortcomings of the literate approach to missions that had existed for nearly two-hundred years. New research enabled a new approach to missions as Jim Slack and others pioneered the way for more fully oral methodologies like Chronological Bible Storying. Today, many new approaches to missions among oral peoples exist. Westerners are beginning to realize their arrogance in equating literacy with the ability to achieve and advance in society. More and more indigenous believers are being equipped to reach their own people with methods that are already familiar to them.

\(^{45}\)Hesselgrave, \textit{Communicating Christ}, 540.
The discipline of orality is still a relatively new field, however. There is much to be learned. In the next generation or two we will be able to measure more carefully the results of introducing literacy to oral cultures, of allowing oral cultures to remain oral, and to shed more light on whether it is necessary to have a written translation of the Scriptures in every language. Many of these insights will come from the indigenous believers in oral cultures themselves. People have been hearing the gospel for generations but it is time more of them are allowed to hear it in a way that they can understand, remember, and reproduce. Orality is one of the major issues in current missions practice. We must let history be our teacher, learning from the rise of orality in modern missions practice, and move forward to the ultimate oral reality – that of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord of all.
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