THE USE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE ORAL TRADITION IN
THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR
THEOLOGY IN ORAL CONTEXTS TODAY

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Introduction

A group of believers gather around a fire for worship in southwest China. One of the older members steps into the flickering light and draws the eyes of the others as he begins reciting a poem recounting his people’s previous demon worship and how the light of the gospel came and provided protection from the spirits, ensured successful crops, and healed many members in the village. The poem lasts more than thirty minutes. Afterward, songs are sung and several believers share their testimonies of how the Great Spirit has worked in their lives.

These same believers seek to spread the good news to neighboring villages. Stories of the creator God and his son, Jesus, are told around the fires in villages dotting the glacial river from the highest elevations down into lush valleys. Surprising to many is the fact that this group has no written Bible. What they know of the Scripture is housed in the poems, stories, and dances familiar to the culture. This particular group of people is living between two worlds. There has never been a need for the formal, scholarly written script used by only the most educated monks. The language the local government attempts to force upon these minorities is fiercely rejected. The written word is not completely foreign but is of no value in this remote mountain community. The important historical and cultural traditions of the community are stored, not in books, but in the minds of the elders. The stories are not read; rather they are recited in long epic poems and enacted through intricate dances. If one were to inquire what this group believes about God one would only need to find a seat by the fire and watch and listen as theology unfolds before everyone’s eyes.
The Importance of Studying Oral Theology

Such a scenario is more common than many people realize. Highly literate westerners often do not realize that more than four billion people on earth, nearly two-thirds of the population, prefer an oral style of learning and communicating over a literate style. More staggering still is that ninety percent of Christian workers still present the gospel with a highly literate communication style that makes it difficult for oral learners to understand and communicate gospel truths to others.1 Herbert Klem notes, “we generally assume that people who hear our message should go on to read the Bible for themselves and thus be responsible for their own Christian development. Our plans to produce growing churches and mature Christians usually are dependant on studious, Bible-reading people.”2 Klem assumed everyone wanted to learn to read when he began his work as a missionary. It was not until some years later that he realized “many of them did not want a religion that would require them to learn to read, because they valued personal, memorized, oral communication.”3

Common church planting strategy calls for healthy churches that are free of unnecessary outside influence, are led by local indigenous leaders, are reproducible, and are contextualized in the local culture. Again, Klem comments that “in a predominately oral society, the church ought to minister and teach primarily through indigenous oral media. . . . If a denomination which has a predominately oral society depends primarily upon written material for most of its Bible study and teaching, then at the heart of its ministry such a denomination is not indigenous.”4 In essence, oral societies not only receive and transmit the Scriptures in oral form, they also use oral methods to interpret and apply the Scriptures to their lives. Their

3Ibid.
theology is oral theology and is different in both form and function from systematic theology. Oral theology is better understood when contrasted to traditional systematic theology.

**Defining Oral Theology**

Grudem very generally defines systematic theology as any study that answers the question, “What does the whole Bible teach about such and such a topic?” Grudem goes on to write that “systematic theology involves collecting and understanding all the relevant passages in the Bible on various topics and then summarizing their teachings clearly so that we know what to believe about each topic.”

Systematic theology is usually divided into abstract philosophical categories like sin, justification, sanctification, and atonement. The order of understanding follows the pattern that God used to reveal himself to the biblical authors who recorded what God wanted. The writings were canonized into the Bible and the systematic theologian develops categories to be filled by searching the Scriptures for teaching on that topic. Systematic theology follows an “inextricable link between theology, authorship and authority [and] is still entrenched today as an invisible but powerful assumption of theologians’ self understanding. One reads theology and one writes theology and one interprets/studies theology in the sense of texts handed down in writing.”

In this way, systematic theology is done from above. Oral theology, in contrast, is primarily theology done from below.

Oral theology “refers to the varied religious expressions of an oral community based on their underlying faith experiences.” Oral theology is first developed from an emic perspective while systematic theology is done from an etic perspective. Oral theology is applied,

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7Ibid., 23.
context based, and answers the most important questions about life in that culture. Western systematic theology is stored in books. Oral theology is stored in memory and delivered via dancing, singing, chanting, story telling, art, poetry, and so on. Consider the following insight from African theologian John Pobee:

It is often asserted that churches in Africa have no theology. When one probes what is meant by this remark the response is that they have not produced theological treatises and tomes, systematically worked out in volumes which stand on the shelves of libraries. But it is not exactly true. Sermons are being preached every Sunday, which are not subsequently printed. Such sermons are the articulations of the faith in response to particular hopes and fears of peoples of Africa. They are legitimately called Theology, Oral Theology. This oral theology and oral history may be said to be the stream in which the vitality of the people of faith in Africa, illiterate and literate, is mediated. As such the material cannot be ignored.

Pobee then lists evangelization, preaching, songs, praying, and conversation as the media of oral theology. Professional theologians feel frustrated with this kind of theology because they cannot engage with it as they can with Western theologies. However, oral theology is theology all the same, and Africa, which is largely comprised of oral societies, has to take oral theology seriously.

As these examples reveal, oral theology is an intensely personal way of understanding God’s revelation to a particular community context. Such personalization of the Scripture does not come without danger, however. Church planters should beware of primary oral cultures that see the Bible as holy because of what it symbolizes rather than because of what it contains. Some of these groups might leave the Bible on a table to function as a charm to enhance their prayer and healing rituals but never open it, read it, or even hear it in any kind of oral form. Another potential hermeneutical mishap is when scriptural stories are taken completely out of the

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biblical and historical context and allegorized to local contexts. An example would be a tribe using the Exodus story as a biblical basis for their own takeover of a government in order to escape oppression. Rather than seeing Israel as the nation the exodus refers to, the tribe would see the label “Israel” as applying to themselves.

The goal of this paper is to access the intricacies of oral theology and its sufficiency for sustaining a healthy, reproducing church in an oral context. The paper will be broken into two main sections. First, an exploration of the oral tradition in the New Testament will allow for an assessment of the use of the tradition along with its limitations for supporting healthy, reproducing churches. The second section of the paper will examine oral theology in modern contexts, drawing comparisons with the oral tradition in the New Testament, and make an assessment of the vitality of oral theology for supporting modern healthy, reproducing churches in oral contexts.

The Use of the Oral Tradition in the New Testament

Evangelical scholars and many other biblical scholars find historical evidence that Jesus died around AD 30 and the first Gospel, Mark, was written around AD 60-65. Before the traditions of Jesus were written down in the form of the Gospels, they were passed on orally. In the first decades of the church people primarily learned about Jesus, not by reading, but by listening to preaching and teaching. Luke shows the progression from oral tradition to written word in his Gospel. Luke’s stated goal is to compile a narrative of what had been accomplished during Jesus’ lifetime. There were many eyewitnesses to Jesus’ life and ministry and stories about Jesus had been circulating in oral format for many years. Luke’s objective was to write an

\[\text{11} \text{Jonathan A. Draper, "Confessional Western Text-Centered Biblical Interpretation and an Oral or Residual-Oral Context," Semeia 73 (1996), 66.}\]

\[\text{12} \text{Paul D. Wegner, The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origen and Development of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 130.}\]
orderly account of the oral tradition for Theophilus. Luke wanted Theophilus to have certainty concerning the things he had been taught about Jesus through the oral tradition. Luke’s statement shows continuity between the oral tradition Theophilus was familiar with and what Luke, Matthew, and Mark were writing. Otherwise, if Luke was writing a different account than the oral tradition Theophilus had been taught, the latter would not be moved to certainty about the events but rather to confusion and doubt.\textsuperscript{13} There is general consensus that Luke and the other Gospel writers followed the oral tradition rather than written accounts though both the documentary and the oral tradition schools have their defenders.\textsuperscript{14} Based on the evidence, I believe that the oral tradition was largely the basis from which the Gospel writers drew. Below is a survey of the oral tradition in both the Gospels and the letters of the New Testament. The survey will be brief since massive amounts of literature have been produced on the oral tradition and little of what follows is new or groundbreaking in nature.

**The Oral Tradition in the Gospels**

Mark was likely written first, around AD 65, with oral input from Peter. Mark’s written Gospel then became a source for Matthew and Luke along with Q. Luke and Matthew also had their own unique oral sources, known as L and M.\textsuperscript{15} Most of the general oral tradition is thought to be contained in the hypothetical source, Q. Q is short for the German word, *quelle* which means source. The theory that Q was based on oral tradition is not without critics, however. Paul Wegner states that many scholars believe the similarities in the synoptic Gospels go beyond what could be expected merely from oral tradition, especially with regard to the order


\textsuperscript{14}For further reading, see Carroll Stuhlmueller, "Influence of Oral Tradition upon Exegesis and the Senses of Scripture," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 20 (1958), 299.

\textsuperscript{15}Stein, *Jesus the Messiah*, 45.
of material.\textsuperscript{16} There are several issues with this line of reasoning, however. First, many western academicians underestimate the power of the oral tradition in oral based societies. Second, there is a difference between biblical authors drawing from the oral tradition at large and then ordering the material themselves and stating that the oral tradition itself had already ordered the events of Jesus’ life and ministry. Terence Maurnet makes a good case for the largely oral nature of Q and N. T. Wright allows that Q may be following both oral and written traditions but affirms that the oral tradition of Q was fixed enough to be reliable.\textsuperscript{17} The Gospels are primarily theological biographies about Jesus. The letters of the New Testament take that underlying theology and apply it to specific contexts. The next section will explore how Paul and others used the oral tradition in their letters and also examine how the letters functioned in a mixed oral context.

The Oral Tradition in the New Testament Letters

In general, a letter functions as a substitute for someone’s personal presence and personal oral communication. In one sense, all letters possess some kind of oral nature. The New Testament letters were often dictated to scribes and were meant to be read aloud in usual circumstances. Paul’s letters, when closely examined, make use of oral traits like diatribal arguments. One can safely conclude that the letters of the New Testament can be situated somewhere between orality and literacy with regard to genre.\textsuperscript{18} Ito goes on to list several occurrences in Paul’s letters that make use of the written tradition in the Old Testament and adapt it to an oral delivery. The letters in general can be seen as a dictated blend of what had been delivered orally through preaching and teaching coupled with some use of Greek literary

\textsuperscript{16}Wegner, \textit{Texts to Translations}, 64.


rhetoric. The progression for confessing one’s faith found in Romans 10 is one example.  

The majority of the oral tradition found in the letters comes in the form of the *agrapha*, which are the recorded statements of Jesus not found in the Gospels. Paul’s correspondence contains the bulk of the *agrapha* statements. A few examples will suffice. Paul commends his readers in Acts 20:35 to “remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’” 1 Corinthians 7:10 contains a reference to something Jesus said as Paul gives instruction regarding marriage. Later in 9:14 Paul writes, “In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.” Another example is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 as Paul declares teaching he received “by a word from the Lord.” Paul’s instructions on taking the Lord’s Supper found in 1 Corinthians 11 likely came from the oral tradition as well because of the early date the letter was written, around 54-55, five to ten years before Mark’s Gospel was recorded. Similarly, Paul mentions that he was persuaded in the Lord that nothing is unclean in itself in Romans 14:14. Paul likely wrote Romans in the winter of 56-57, several years before the first Gospel was written. A last example from the writings of Paul is found in 2 Thess. 2:15, where Paul commends the Thessalonians to stand firm in the traditions they were taught by Paul’s team, either by spoken word or by the first letter Paul had sent. Here Paul is referring to what had become his own oral tradition based on the authoritative teaching he had received from the Lord, either through the standing oral tradition or from Paul’s time of preparation before he launched his missionary career. Finally, several authors find use of the oral tradition from both the Old Testament and the synoptic era in the book of Revelation. The judgment language of Revelation

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19 Paul draws from the written text of Deuteronomy 30:14 and gives the text new expression in an oral confession of faith. Such a confession was likely part of Paul’s evangelistic preaching before he recorded the words in his letter to the Romans.


6, in particular, contains allusions to Jesus’ words of judgment in the Sermon on the Mount, among other places.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{The Trustworthiness of the Oral Tradition}

Evangelical scholars are convinced that the oral tradition was accurately recorded in the Gospels and that the tradition itself was not significantly altered prior to recording. More liberal scholars, however, find what they feel to be multiple oral traditions circulating in the first decades after Christ’s death. Scholars heavily immersed in source and redaction criticism find little in the New Testament that they deem authentic. Other early works are supposedly based on the oral tradition, though these works are in conflict with the New Testament. One example is the Gospel of Peter. This false Gospel claims to contain additional words and actions of Jesus that are not found in the canonical Gospels.\textsuperscript{23} It sometimes becomes impossible to prove what Jesus might have said and what he did not say. Can these same critiques be made of the oral tradition recorded in the Gospels? The best evidence for the credibility of the New Testament involves the early date the books were written and the link of the writers to those who were with Jesus. A good case can be made for the accuracy and trustworthiness of the oral accounts.\textsuperscript{24}

First, oral transmissions typically take on a fixed form, and embellishments or mistakes could be easily detected by familiar listeners. Second, the disciples would have had a tough time changing the accounts of Jesus’ life because there were so many eyewitnesses still alive when the Gospels were written. Paul notes that five hundred people witnessed Jesus alive after his resurrection and most of them were still alive when Paul wrote his letter to the


\textsuperscript{24}These defenses of the reliability of the Gospel accounts are derived from Wegner, \textit{Texts to Translations}, 130-131.
Additionally, as mentioned above, if Luke had changed any of the present oral tradition when he wrote his Gospel, surely Theophilus would have picked up on the inconsistencies and exposed Luke as a fraud. Third, many of the disciples were martyred for their faith and it is unlikely they died for what they knew to be false information or made up claims about Jesus. It would have been easy and convenient for the disciples to alter the story in order to escape death but they did not do so. Fourth, Scripture contains many negative assessments of the disciples, apostles, and churches that are embarrassing to those involved. If the writers were not intent on keeping the oral tradition accurate and conveying what really happened, they could have easily altered the texts to remove features shedding negative light on themselves. Finally, an early church writer, Eusebius, wrote that information from books would not help him as much as the word of a living and surviving voice of one who had been with Jesus.\textsuperscript{26} Eusebius was speaking to the legitimacy of the oral tradition.

For evangelicals, perhaps the most important assurance of the accuracy of the New Testament is the witness of the Holy Spirit and the sealing of the canon of Scripture.\textsuperscript{27} Before long, however, many recordings of the supposed oral tradition were produced such as the Secret Gospel of Mark, Gospels of Peter, Thomas, Nicodemus, Philip, Barnabas, Mary, the Twelve Apostles, and so on. These works were produced well after the New Testament was written. Some or all of these books may indeed have actual statements of Jesus and his followers. However, the Holy Spirit did not choose to inspire these texts, the primary evidence being that most are at significant variance with the New Testament. In summary, the oral tradition, as recorded in the New Testament is accurate and trustworthy. The question now is, “If the oral tradition was accurate, why was there a need to write the Gospels and letters of the New Testament?”

\textsuperscript{25}1 Corinthians 15:6.

\textsuperscript{26}Stein, \textit{Jesus the Messiah}, 35. Stein quotes Eusebius from Ecclesiastical History 3.39.4.

\textsuperscript{27}See Wegner, \textit{Texts to Translations}, 129-150 for a detailed account of the Holy Spirit’s preserving work and the canonization process.
Testament?"

The Limitations of the Oral Tradition in the New Testament

This section is broken into two parts. The first part will survey the literacy capabilities of the first century near eastern world. Attention will be given to the particularities of oral and residually oral societies. The second section will address several issues related to church growth that necessitated written accounts of the Jesus tradition rather than a solely oral transmission.

First Century Literacy

There are massive variations concerning the literacy rate and capability of those living in Rome and Jerusalem in the first century. O. Murray states that ancient Greece was a literate society and that in the Near East of the first century, writing was an essential component of life at almost all levels.28 Contrast that statement with W.V. Harris who argues that no more than thirty percent could read or write in the first century.29 Some argue that the Jewish population was much more literate because of their religious tradition, written Scripture, and schooling system. Jewish men might be expected to be literate because of their enrollment in Jewish school as youths. The likelihood of this idea is impossible to know. Those who might read the Scriptures in school likely never read another book.30 Outside of the privileged few with an education, the situation was likely very different. Jeremias notes, “[P]easants may have had some knowledge of Hebrew that was chanted in the synagogues, but they had little access to written texts. They were derisively referred to by the Pharisees as Am-ha-ares (people of the

land, peasants) because they could not read the Law.”

It seems that even Jesus made a distinction between those who could read and those who could not. To the educated religious teachers, Jesus would say, “Have you not read,” but to the masses he would often say, “You have heard.”

In all likelihood, the early church was a mixed community with a high residual orality that was moving toward literary communication. Those who could not read were not unfamiliar with reading and writing and often could find someone to read for them. Even among those who could and did read, mostly the scribes and teachers, memorization and oral transmission was highly valued. The oral tradition regarding the law was massive and later recorded in the Mishnah and Talmud. Students were trained in memorization techniques and boasted that their minds were like “well-plastered cisterns that did not lose a drop.” The growing influence of Greek and Roman culture brought a higher value for literacy than may have previously existed, especially in the smaller towns. The growing literacy rate did not mean that the oral preference disappeared immediately. Ito notes that in many societies, “even after literacy has become common, oral mentality and preference for orality have persisted.” Orality expert Walter Ong concurs that “even after the development of writing, the pristine oral-aural modes of knowledge storage and retrieval still dominate.”

In conclusion, evidence suggests that the first century biblical communities were

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32 See Matt. 22:31 and Mark 12:26 where Jesus speaks to the Sadducees and Matt. 5 where Jesus speaks to the crowds.


largely non-literate. Among those who could read, many facets of oral rhetoric and preference still carried over. The culture was familiar with and trusted oral modes of communication. Based on the oral traditions of Rabbinic and Greek education styles and remarks from early writers like Eusebius, a strong case can be made that the teachings of Jesus and his disciples were principally in oral form for the first three to five decades after their inception and that these oral forms were accurate and sufficient. 37 The question begs to be asked, then, why was the oral tradition eventually written down?

The Necessity of Written Scripture in the Early Church

Several reasons necessitated the writing of the oral tradition and each is intricately tied to the expansion and missionary nature of the early church. 38 First, the church was growing and expanding widely, geographically speaking. Each church needed an accurate account of Jesus’ and the Apostles’ teachings as Paul himself notes in 2 Thess. 2:15 and 1 Corinthians 11:2. The apostles and others with knowledge of the oral tradition were not numerous enough to physically travel to every church and spend enough time there passing on the oral Scriptures. Letters were written to aid fast, widespread, and accurate transmission of the teachings.

Second, written materials can help combat heresies. False prophets began claiming to have special insight from God and were teaching contrary to what Paul and others had received from the Lord and taught. An objective standard was needed to judge these new teachings against. As those who personally witnessed Christ began dying off and the church grew, there was no way to connect teaching with living persons, which is an important aspect in oral communities. The solution in a mixed literacy world was to use a letter or copy of a letter from Paul or others as evidence for the truth.

37 Millard, Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus, 196.

38 This section derived from Wegner, Texts to Translations, 132-33.
Finally, with the expansion of the church and the influx of heretical teaching, it became difficult to discern what was original and what was not. F. F. Bruce notes the reluctance of the early church to transition away from the oral tradition but that the move was increasingly necessary. Bruce writes:

Throughout the second century there were some who carefully treasured up whatever floating scraps of [the oral tradition] had been preserved in Christian memory, but by the last quarter of the century the stream had dried up. Even in the first quarter of the century it had been reduced to a trickle, to judge by what Papias bishop of Hierapolis, was able to collect in his declared preference for the testimony of a ‘living and abiding voice’ over what he could find in a book.  

In summary, while the Gospel writers and apostles were alive, it seems that the oral tradition was indeed sufficient for the health of the churches. However, as the church entered a period of rapid expansion, those first personal witnesses began dying, and when heresies broke in claiming an oral tradition of their own, it became necessary to accurately record Spirit-inspired teachings to ensure a long standing, objective accounting of the truth.

In the first section of this paper, I have labored to explore the use and limitations of the oral tradition in the New Testament. The next section will explore the use of oral theology in modern contexts with attention given to the formulation and interpretation of theology in oral contexts.

Doing Theology in Oral Contexts Today

The mixed literacy community found in the New Testament is similar to literacy contexts missionaries work in around the world today. In order to better understand the context of oral cultures, an overview of the orality-literacy spectrum will be made. Next, examples of theology done in oral contexts will provide ground for the assessment of oral theology for sustaining healthy, reproducing churches in oral contexts.

The Orality-Literacy Spectrum

First, the orality-literacy spectrum must be explained. Many have a tendency to overgeneralize the nature of oral cultures and place anything related to orality under the category of primary oral learner. Such a generalization is unhelpful. Primary oral learners occupy an extreme end of the literacy spectrum. Those living in this culture have little to no exposure to print materials. The spoken language may not have been reduced to writing at all. Primary oral cultures house all of their cultural knowledge in their minds. Information is delivered through speaking, singing, dancing, proverbs, oral poetry, and art simply because no other media exists to transmit information. There are very few primary oral cultures in the world today.

Further along the literacy spectrum is the secondary oral culture. The written word is familiar to those in this culture but is not the preferred means of communication. People may know how to read but may not have read a book since elementary school. Those in a secondary oral culture may use writing on occasion, such as for legal documents, but information is usually transmitted via story, poem, or song. Many of the unreached people groups today are secondary oral learners.

Closer to the literate end of the spectrum are the residual oral learners. These people use reading and writing every day. They attain most of their information from reading or following highly structured news broadcasts. Written historical records may exist chronicling their culture. Literacy is familiar and common. However, the deepest cultural values may still be communicated orally through epic poems, songs, or ritual dances. Rites of intensification and other cultural signposts are performed rather than written and read. It takes a long time for a culture to completely move away from its oral roots.

Finally, there is the highly literate end of the spectrum where the preferred medium for communication is the written word. People are more comfortable writing an essay about a topic than acting it out. The vast majority of learning takes place through reading and little cultural history is stored in oral form. Few people in the culture can recite their history without first
brushing up through reading. Few people in the world fall into the highly literate category. The remainder of this paper will deal primarily with secondary oral cultures since the majority of current ministry fields fall under this category.

Three Types of Oral Transmission

Primary and secondary oral cultures can be further divided by the type of oral transmission used for various kinds of information. Kenneth Bailey suggests there are three types of oral transmission, each with a varying level of enforced accuracy. First is the uncontrolled, informal oral tradition. An example would be a rumor passed around a business. There is no known author or audience. Details of the rumor change often and no one is surprised if the version he or she heard varies from earlier versions.

Second is the controlled, formal oral tradition. This method is the one Islamic Sheiks use to rote memorize the Koran. There is an identified teacher, student, and block of information to be learned and passed on. The message content is expected to be rigidly fixed and there is no room for personalization or variation of the message. Few types of oral transmission follow this strict model, as the memorization necessary is intensive and an objective source is often not available.

Third, there is a more balanced transmission method called the informal, controlled oral tradition. This method is most common in oral societies. Within the tradition, there are three levels of control enforced on material transmitted. In some cases, there is little control and total flexibility. An example is the telling of a joke. The general flow and punch line remain the same but characters may be altered to fit the context. At the other end, the community exerts total control and the message is allowed no flexibility. An example is an epic poem or proverb key to the identity of the culture. In the middle is a method allowing for some flexibility and interpretation, but still falling under the control of the community at large. This is the arena where parables, stories, and historical narratives fall and is likely the transmission method used
by the synoptic writers. Additionally, the informal, controlled oral tradition is the most common way oral cultures do theology, as will be shown below.

The Formulation of Theology in Oral Contexts

The Lomwe of Africa house their theology in their songs and not in written texts. Laryea writes of “the many ordinary Christians whose reflections on the gospel can be discerned in their prayers, songs, testimonies, thank offerings, and sermons. They are the ones who are now beginning to set for us the parameters and framework for doing theology in a new key.”

The author recorded and analyzed two-hundred sixty three songs to discern the theology of the tribe. The themes which emerged were deemed most important and most contextual to the people. Prominent themes were judgment, the return of Christ, sins, repentance, death, and life as a journey.

Oral theology is personal and contextual. It is emic theology. Speaking of Pentecostal oral theology, one author notes

The theology of the oral Church is automatically more pragmatic, more experiential, less critical, less logical, and more personal. It relies, if you will, more on testimony, and less on written texts. Written texts—even the Bible itself—are judged according to this different set of expectations, and they play a fundamentally different role in the daily life of the Church than they do in the technical world of scholarship.

Oral theology relies on face to face contact between those involved in the interpretation and application process. Oral theology values testimony more than texts. In conclusion, it is clear

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that theology done in oral contexts is personal and closely tied to the perceived ways God has worked in the lives of those in the culture. Oral theology is expressed physically and verbally and is packaged in a dramatically different form than that which westerners are familiar. The personal interpretation and application of oral theology calls for a detailed examination of the interpretation process. Do oral cultures approach Scripture interpretation differently than literate cultures?

**Interpretation Methods in Oral Contexts**

One author argues that theological reflection based on the spoken word is fundamentally different from that based on print. Oral theology employs different strategies of argumentation and exposition that stem from different understandings of what it means for something to be “true.” He concludes that oral theology then leads to different dispositions toward spirituality and ecclesial life. Oral learners are part of a community and interpretation of Scripture often involves the entire body of believers. However, a prominent societal figure can have a lot of power through relationship and trust. This power can be used to lead the community toward or away from the truth. Consequently, the relationship of the community with the teacher or master is as important as the actual features of the story. Consider the following example from the Pentecostal oral tradition:

Just as oral people distrust experts, so also oral Christians tend to measure theological competence against a more pragmatic yardstick. Consider this comment, which I once overheard at an Assembly of God district council: "He may have a string of degrees, but he can't preach his way out of a paper bag." What matters here is not what is said, but the assumption upon which the claim is made: The ability to preach one's way out of a paper bag is surely more important than a Ph.D. behind one's name. In an oral community, "them as can, does; them as can't, teaches." Practice trumps theory every time. It is not that the

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\text{Camery-Hoggatt, “The Word of God from Living Voices,” 225-26.}
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experts know something that the oral preacher cannot find out. It is that that exegete knows something the oral preacher thinks is irrelevant.\textsuperscript{45} A final example sheds additional light on the oral interpretation and delivery process. Davis notes that oral cultures “demonstrate a certain pattern of thought and behavior. Characteristics of such cultures include a lack of concern for original forms and authorship, extreme respect for rhetorical skills, placing greater value on interpersonal interaction than on abstract sets of values and logical deductions, and stress on the community rather than on individualism and individual thought.”\textsuperscript{46} In summary, oral theology and interpretation is accepted by the community because of the relationship of the community to those transmitting the information. Teachers are considered experts because of who they are and what they have done within the community. Wayne Grudem would not be considered a theological expert because no one in the community has any relationship with Grudem and his teaching comes in the form of a textbook that has no value to the culture.

\textbf{Sustained Study of and Reflection on Scripture in Oral Contexts}

Literate cultures have the entire written Bible and hundreds of biblical commentaries to aid their reflection on and study of Scripture. Endless approaches to word studies, categorizations, comparisons, and analysis can be performed based on written texts. How, if at all, does an oral society carry out sustained reflection on and study of Scripture? Drawing on the work of Walter Ong, theologian Tex Sample defines \textit{study} as follows, “To study, one writes down key ideas, definitions, and concepts, and then compares and contrasts what was said in one place with what was said in another. This [method] is an attempt to be as clear and exact as


\textsuperscript{46} Casey Wayne Davis, "Hebrews 6:4-6 from an Oral Critical Perspective," \textit{Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society} 51 (2008), 754.
possible. Sample contrasts the previous definition with oral cultures, which he declares do not study. Samples says that lack of study does not mean that oral cultures do not learn, but that the way they learn engages the memory differently than the way learning takes place with pen and paper.

The ancient Greeks have long been deemed masters of logic and rhetoric. The logical syllogism was, interestingly, developed by Aristotle who was literate and not by Homer who was oral. Aristotle created great logical and philosophical arguments and categories of thought. Homer created great poetic epics in story form. Writing enabled Aristotle to compare and then categorize. Orality enables relationship and learning by experience. Oral cultures follow an apprenticeship style of learning rather than a studying style of learning. What is learned is only what is useful to the community. What is not useful is quickly forgotten. Couple this utilitarian approach to learning with truths that are usually only received from the respected and known individuals within a society and one may find a society not open to new truths or correction of current theology and applications of the Scripture from outsiders.

The vast majority of people in oral contexts cannot sit down and pour over the text, analyzing the subtle nuances of the author's communication. For oral cultures, "What they heard was what they got." The whole of Scripture is contained in the memories of individuals. Those memories alone provide the grounds for reflecting on the truths of God. Oral memory, however, functions differently from the memories of those growing up in literate cultures. John Harvey notes that “oral culture promotes the development of memory skills. Those memory skills, however, tend to emphasize thematic rather than verbatim recall. Field-based research


48 For more information on Homer’s oral approach, see Ito, “The Written Torah and the Oral Gospel,” 243-44.


50 Davis, "Hebrews 6:4-6 from an Oral Critical Perspective," 754.
done by Parry, Lord, and others highlights the fact that although oral poets, for example, may affirm that they sing the same words, no poem is ever performed in precisely the same way twice.” Ong concurs that, "Hearing a new story [the singer] does not try to memorize it by rote. He digests it in terms of its themes. . . . He then verbalizes it in the formulas or formulaic elements he has in stock.” Now that an overview of doing theology in oral contexts has been made, the next section will examine the limitations of oral theology.

The Limitations of Oral Theology in Modern Contexts

Noted African theologian John Mbiti does not mince words when he says,

Oral theology cannot sustain a long theological argumentation of discourse. The audience of oral theology is generally very limited, very confined to local groups and situations, as well as occasions to which it addresses itself. It is difficult, if not impossible, to transport specific formulations of oral theology from one place to another, from one period to another, without changes and alterations that go with oral transmission.

The structure of this section largely follows that of Mbiti’s thoughts in the quote above. In discussing the limitations of oral theology in modern contexts I will first note the limited audience to which oral theology is disseminated. Next, the specific and localized expressions of oral theology are difficult to accurately transport cross-culturally when planting churches. Finally, I will make the argument that the Scriptural connection for oral theology is remarkably shallow in many oral communities.

Limited Audience in Oral Contexts

Oral cultures are highly relationally based. This paper has shown the community


52 Ibid.

context necessary for authoritative transmission of ideas in oral contexts. Personal interaction is required to enforce the informal, controlled method used to safeguard the reliability of the message. The communal, relational culture used to ensure the accuracy of the message also limits the use of the message. Villages are small. Oral segments that have sustained interaction within urban centers are small. The small, tight knit community of oral cultures often calls for house churches rather than large buildings. The limited size of a house church congregation also limits the breadth of the message. The further one moves from the relational network that provides credibility for the message, the less likely the message is to be received.

**Difficulty in Carrying Localized Oral Theology to Other Cultural Contexts**

Oral theology is housed in the songs, dances, poems, and stories of the culture. The personal and contextual nature of the theology does not carry well cross-culturally. A Muslim background community may have theology tied to purity, the obedience of Christ before the Father, and focus on Christ fulfilling the law. An animistic society may focus on themes such as Christ’s power over demons, healing, and Christ as ancestor or older brother. A group of believers from either culture would have great difficulty transmitting their theological themes to the other culture. The question becomes, can an oral culture abstract their theology out of their local context in order to transmit it to a completely different context? Such contextualization may indeed be possible but it would come as a great challenge.

**Shallow Scripture Base for Doing Oral Theology**

A final limitation and challenge of oral theology is the shallow Scripture base many people are left with. Oral cultures are usually reached through Chronological Bible Storying (CBS) methods of evangelism and discipleship. One must remember that an oral culture does not have the luxury of reflecting on the entirety of Scripture. What they hear is all they know of
the Bible. If the missionaries develop a twenty-four story set, then the theology derived from
within those twenty-four stories constitutes the entirety of what is available for further
theological reflection. The largest story sets often do not contain more than one hundred stories.
Again, the theological reflection and growth available to the people is directly tied to the body of
Scripture they have access to. Apollos provides a good example of the limitation one encounters
from not being able to access all of Scripture. Apollos knew the Scripture well and taught
accurately, but he only had knowledge up to the baptism of John. Later, Apollos was instructed
further in the Scriptures by Priscilla and Aquila. If there were no Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos
and, similarly, oral cultures would be left with a void in their theology.

What are leaders in an oral culture to do when they are left with a limited story set and
they encounter theological issues their stories do not address? Hopefully, they have access to
other, more mature believers but if not, the situation could lead to syncretism. These limitations
of oral theology are just that, limitations. They can be overcome but the nature of oral learning
poses a unique challenge. I will conclude by offering several thoughts regarding the sufficiency
of oral theology for sustaining healthy, reproducing churches.

**Conclusion: Are Oral Theologies Sufficient for Healthy Reproducing Churches?**

Many parallels are found between the sufficiency of the oral tradition in the
New Testament and the theology within oral cultures today. As with the oral tradition in the
early church, oral theology and transmission methods today are sufficient for reaching oral
people with the gospel, planting a church, and even allowing for some sustained reflection on
Scripture. However, the sufficiency of oral theology for producing healthy, reproducing
churches is limited for the same reasons the oral tradition was limited in the New Testament.

Rapid, geographic expansion of the church removes the message from the

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authoritative communal source. Remember that oral cultures tend to place authority in the one speaking rather than in the message itself. Similar to the oral tradition in the New Testament, limited story sets cannot deal with new heresies and theological difficulties not addressed by the story set. The influx of heresies in the first century, many relying on their own version of the oral tradition, necessitated written Scripture. In an oral society, there is no objective, fixed source of Scripture within the culture to fall back on. Oral cultures have no way of adding to their body of theology without new stories. Stories alone will never allow for conveyance of the entirety of Scripture. Just as in the New Testament, oral transmission and oral theology have their necessary place. Ultimately, however, a written record is necessary. God could have ensured the accurate transmission of Scripture through memory alone but he did not. As Ong and others point out, oral cultures prefer to memorize information thematically rather than rotely. Small variations creep in and can lead to larger variation as the message moves cross-culturally.

Missionaries must begin where the people are. Since two-thirds of the world’s population are preferred oral learners, the topic of oral theology takes on great significance. Many mission agencies and missionaries settle for reaching oral peoples through a limited story set of select scriptural themes. This method is the appropriate way to begin ministering to oral peoples. The lost can hear and respond to the gospel and be gathered into churches. The ability of oral theology to sustain a healthy, reproducing church is to be questioned, however. More research needs to be done on the theology of congregations that have been exposed to limited story sets. Indigenous oral peoples that plant churches cross-culturally need to be studied more in depth as well. Chronological Bible Storying is, for good reason, the preferred method for reaching oral peoples today. CBS can be uncritically applied, however. It is no one’s desire to critique and expose weaknesses in a prominent and effective method for church planting, but

55 Of course Scripture has authority over every man, woman, and culture but oral peoples do not begin with such an understanding.
without such examination and critique, blind spots exist. CBS is not the magic formula for world missions but it is a place to start. I pray the Church will take an honest look at its understanding of orality, CBS, and the sufficiency of oral theology to sustain healthy, reproducing churches. Perhaps the information in this paper is a small step in the right direction.
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