

BEWARE OF THE ORALITY MOVEMENT

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Introduction

Over the last decade or so there has been a radical change in the way the gospel is preached and taught. The new way of teaching the gospel is called storytelling, and the movement behind storytelling is called the “Orality movement.” It is called the Orality movement for it aims to meet the needs of people who are unable to read and therefore known as “oral learners.” People who don’t want to read are known as “preferenced” oral learners. The Orality movement insists that the best way to reach oral learners with the gospel is by telling them Bible stories.

The Lausanne Movement for World Evangelization

For us to understand the Orality movement we need to recognise that it is largely the product of the Lausanne Movement for World Evangelization that was founded by Billy Graham, John Stott and other prominent evangelical leaders. The first Lausanne Congress in 1974 called for a renewed mission to the world with a more holistic approach to evangelism. Billy Graham said: “Evangelism has taken on a new meaning.” The Lausanne Covenant promoted a new way of proclaiming the gospel that placed the message of personal salvation from sin alongside the message of social justice.

In 2004 the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization felt led by the Holy Spirit to hold a conference to develop effective strategies for taking the gospel to the world. Lausanne’s research programme had already identified the need to develop oral methods of communication as one of the most important issues facing the church.ⁱ The conference ended with this affirmation: “We acknowledge the reality that much of the world is made up of oral learners who understand best when information comes to them by means of stories. A large proportion of the world’s populations are either unable to or unwilling to absorb information through written communications. Therefore, a need exists to share the ‘Good News’ and to disciple new Christians in story form and parables.”ⁱⁱ

The International Orality Network (ION)

In 2005 Lausanne helped to establish the International Orality Network with the sole purpose of spreading the concept of storytelling to mission organizations and churches around the world. The director of the ION, Rev. Avery Willis, said that past methods of using literature and the written word have been a conspicuous failure among people living in oral cultures. “The fact that literate, print-oriented, missionaries from the West have missed this oral storytelling method for so long may be one of the single most serious tactical mistakes we have made in the last two hundred years. I grieve over all the time, energy and funding that I have personally directed toward print evangelism mission endeavours that missed the mark for oral learners.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The ION has a promotional video called “Knock, Knock” which explains the problem of using literature in teaching the gospel. “There are four billion people in our world known as oral learners — an overwhelming two-thirds of the world’s population. They’re found in every culture group in the world. It’s as if they’re deaf to the gospel, unable to hear the urgent knock on the door; unable to hear the good news because it comes to them through *literate means* that do not speak to their heart. This global reality represents an unparalleled challenge for the gospel, a challenge that will require the church and mission organisations the world over to *radically rethink everything we’re doing*. It will demand that we change our fundamental

approach to evangelism, discipleship, leadership training and church planting. It will demand that we find a way to address the unique needs of these oral learners in a way they can understand, a way they can hear, really hear.”^{iv}

The ION now has over a hundred mission organizations and denominations in partnership. Membership organisations include: The Lausanne Movement, Youth with a Mission, (YWAM), Wycliffe Global Alliance (formerly Wycliffe Bible Translators), Trans World Radio (TWR), T4 Global, Story Runners, SIL, The Seed Company, Scriptures In Use, One Story Partnership, The International Missions Board, Heart Sounds, Global Recordings Network, The God's Story Project, Faith Comes By Hearing, E3 Partners, Call2All and Campus Crusade for Christ.

Making Disciples of Oral Learners

Lausanne’s orality strategy is described in the booklet *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (2005), which has been translated into Korean, Chinese, French, Russian, Spanish and Arabic. The booklet claims that storytelling is the most effective method for taking the gospel to “oral learners.”

Literate styles cause confusion

A theme that runs through *Making Disciples* is that a *literate* approach to communicating the gospel creates difficulties for those living in an oral culture. The problem is illustrated by the experience of an Indian pastor who shared the good news of the gospel in his village, but to his surprise people were not able to understand the message. The pastor continued to preach the gospel, but there were few results. He concluded that the problem was that he used “a lecture method with printed books” which he learnt in Bible school.^v He reasoned that people were not hearing the gospel because it was being communicated by “literate means.”

Making Disciples interprets the experience of this pastor as demonstrating that literate styles of communication that “use the printed page or expositional, analytical and logical presentations of God’s word” make it almost impossible for oral learners to understand the message of the gospel.^{vi} This is because teaching materials that have literate stylistic features are likely to confuse oral learners.^{vii} So in the eyes of the orality group it is pointless to use the printed Word of God to instruct oral learners, for they find it difficult to follow literate-styled presentations, even if they are made orally. The implication is obvious. Scripture (God’s written Word) has “literate stylistic features,” and therefore may confuse oral learners. It follows that reading the Scriptures to oral learners is a waste of time for they cannot follow literate-styled presentations. The effect is that oral learners are being denied the Word of God recorded in Scripture. The assertion that a literate approach that makes use of the written Word is ineffective among two-thirds of the world people is contrary to Scripture, for God has promised that His Word will not return to Him void (Isaiah 55:11)

The Oral Bible

The orality movement has developed an “oral Bible” that allows God’s Word to be produced accurately from memory for the purpose of re-telling and is seen as the key to planting churches among unreached people groups.^{viii} The oral Bible, which must be able to penetrate the culture and worldview of a people group to really become meaningful, is created by crafting stories. *Making Disciples* explains: “Crafting Bible stories is shaping the stories from a literature format to an oral format and *making such changes as needed* to maintain a clear focus on the story’s main point(s), to give clarity in telling, and *to make necessary changes needed for accommodating certain worldview issues* and story continuity ...”^{ix} [my italics].

Making Disciples says that a storytelling approach involves selecting and crafting stories that convey the essential biblical message in a way that is sensitive to the worldview of the receptor

society. Stories are adapted so that they do not offend the culture of oral learners. By naming a collection of stories an oral Bible, the orality movement implies that their oral Bibles have the authority of God's Word.

While *Making Disciples* concedes that there is no definitive oral Bible, it provides a working definition of an oral Bible as "the accumulated Bible stories that have been told to an oral society." Typically, this is between 50 and 200 stories. An oral Bible differs from one culture to another, for it depends upon the felt or actual needs and worldview of the listeners. "An oral Bible becomes the permanent possession of an oral communicator and is available for use at all times. Oral communicators are able to retain, recall, and repeat from memory their oral Bible."^x So each teacher and each disciple has their own version of an oral Bible, which changes over time as their memory fades.

Advice on crafting Bible stories

Story Runners, a ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ, has provided a storytelling tip sheet for crafting a story. Bible crafters are told to avoid words and phrases used in some Bible translations but which are not used in everyday speech and can be confusing. "Instead of 'sin,' consider using the phrase 'disobedience to God.' Other difficult words to avoid include righteous, forgive, atonement, baptism, repent, and saved."^{xi}

Here is an example of a crafted story, based on Luke 15:8-10, developed by Story Runners. The story is entitled "Lost" and tells of a woman who celebrates with her family and friends "because she has found her lost coin. In the same way God and all his angels rejoice when *one person changes their disobedient lifestyle.*" The words of Christ are: "Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God *over one sinner that repenteth*" (Luke 15:10). Note that the words "sinner" and "repent" are not used in the crafted story. And what does it mean to change a disobedient lifestyle? This example shows how a crafted story can pervert the Word of God.

Oral learners by choice

The ION claims that around four billion people, that is, two-thirds of the world's population, are oral learners. So storytelling is aimed not only at illiterate people, but also at those who can read but choose to hear stories rather than God's Word — they are referred to as "preferenced oral learners." *Making Disciples* says the church must explore ways to be more effective in communicating with preferenced oral learners.^{xii} "We possess knowledge of the greatest story ever told. We increasingly understand how to communicate that knowledge better with the two-thirds of the population of earth who will receive it best through storying and other oral means. In recent years we have begun to see that storying can greatly increase effectiveness even with literate people, including college students and business and professional people."^{xiii}

Making Disciples concludes that because of the insights gleaned from research and collaboration, "Christians have the opportunity to reach in our generation the billions of unreached people in the world headed to a Christless eternity. Following the example of Jesus' own witness through parables and proverbs, we can communicate the gospel orally in a way that these unreached people can understand, respond to and reproduce. Let us therefore go forth embracing oral communicators as partners — together making disciples of all peoples to the glory of God!"^{xiv}

There is now such confidence in the effectiveness of oral methods that the International Mission Board (IMB) of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest denominational international mission agency, is heavily engaged in this approach. Hundreds of field teams are using storying as a primary strategy in dozens of countries. Radio ministries are becoming

increasingly involved in supporting oral approaches. FEBA Radio has partnered with other agencies in Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa in broadcasting stories. TWR has recently identified orality as one of five top strategic initiatives.

Understanding Orality

Making Disciples asserts that “it is essential that literate church leaders seek to understand orality.”^{xv} Christian leaders are encouraged to learn about oral means of communication by reading the book *Orality and Literacy* (1982), written by Professor Walter Ong, a Jesuit priest and humanist scholar. This is an important point to understand — the theoretical framework of the orality movement is based on a book written by a Jesuit priest.^{xvi} The aim of Ong’s book is to consider “the deeper implications of the contrasts between orality and writing.”^{xvii}

The starting point of Ong’s analysis is the premise that human beings in primary oral cultures, untouched by writing in any form, possess great wisdom.^{xviii} He says that “oral art forms which developed during the tens of thousands of years before writing obviously had no connection with writing at all.”^{xix} He maintains that we are so literate in ideology that we think writing comes naturally. “We have to remind ourselves from time to time that writing is completely and irremediably artificial.”^{xx} He repeatedly refers to orality as natural and to writing as artificial. His basic sympathies are clear, for he alludes to written text as “dead” and to speech as more “real.”^{xxi} He argues that humans need to return to their earlier, evolutionary, primitive heritage of myth, fable, story, image and symbol. He degrades the written word and eulogises the spoken word and visual images as being more closely connected to human consciousness.

The fallacy of Ong

Ong’s orality theory has two flaws. The first is his evolutionary view that presents a false view of primitive man living with the spoken word alone, which he claims is the ideal method of communication. He views the advent of writing as a Fall from a utopian, primitive world in which myth, fable and story were the methods of communication. But his claim that cultures, in which there is no written word, possess and practice great wisdom is disingenuous, for the stark reality is that most oral cultures are ruled by superstition and ignorance.

The second flaw in Ong’s thinking is that he has created a false dichotomy between the spoken and written word. He has sought to show that oral and written communication stand in opposition to one another. And the outcome of this invalid comparison is that the “natural” spoken word is superior to the “artificial” written word. But Ong is wrong, for speaking and writing are not in competition but are complementary to each other.

Scripture is clear on this point, for God has revealed Himself through both the spoken and the written word. On Mount Sinai God spoke all the words of the Ten Commandments to Israel, and then the finger of God wrote the commandments on tablets of stone as a permanent record for all people for all time. And God commanded his prophet Moses to write his words, “and Moses wrote all the words of the Lord” (Exodus 24:4). And Moses took the book of the covenant, which he had written, and read in the audience of the people, and instructed them to teach the commandments (Exodus 24:7,12). God’s people are commanded to “keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this Book of the Law” (Deuteronomy 30:10).

Storytelling and the Emerging Church

Storytelling is a key technique of the Emerging Church. In his book *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (2003) Brian McLaren, a leading spokesman for the Emerging Church, presents Christianity as a “story.” He claims the narrative version of Christianity is more effective in reaching seekers who are put off by doctrine. He develops a framework of story-telling that is

anti-doctrine, which he claims is the only acceptable framework for the post-modern world. Doctrine is thus the enemy to be overcome by McLaren's new kind of emerging Christianity.

In line with the thinking of the emerging church, the ION promotes the idea that "all the arts – storytelling, singing, dancing, drama, drawing, sculpture, and more – are interrelated ways to tell The Story, especially to oral learners." The ION has set up a music and arts task force which "aims to foster a global movement that will use all the arts in culturally appropriate ways in order to make disciples."^{xxii} Here we have a clear statement of the link between the orality movement and the arts in teaching the Christian story.

Lausanne Three – Cape Town 2010

And so it was no surprise that when the third Lausanne gathering on world evangelization met in Cape Town in October 2010, the Orality Movement was a strategic priority. The Congress, which brought together around four thousand leaders from across the world, was told by Dr. Grant Lovejoy, Professor of Preaching at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, that Christians need to develop new appropriate methods of communication, such as storytelling, drama, songs, visual arts, poetry, chants and music, for they are the most effective methods for reaching the four billion oral learners of this world with the gospel of Christ.^{xxiii}

The Cape Town Congress ended by expressing its total commitment to the orality agenda. The following programme of action has been agreed by the Lausanne Commitment 2011. "Let us:

1. Make greater use of oral methodologies in discipling programmes, even among literate believers.
2. Make available an oral format Story Bible in the heart languages of unreached people groups as a matter of priority.
3. Encourage mission agencies to develop oral strategies, including: the recording and distribution of oral Bible stories for evangelism ...
4. Encourage local churches in the Global South to engage with unreached people groups in their area through oral methods that are specific to their worldview.
5. Encourage seminaries to provide curricula that will train pastors and missionaries in oral methodologies."^{xxiv}

Conclusion

The Orality Movement, which is based on the flawed theories of a Jesuit priest and the weird practices of the Emerging Church, is teaching a false gospel. It is committed to a non-biblical version of the Christian faith that is without a doctrinal base. The oral Bible is not God's Word, but a collection of crafted stories. The deception of the oral Bible is that it crafts Scripture to make it culturally appropriate and worldview sensitive. It offers a non-offensive gospel that is not the gospel of truth.

And so we must conclude that the actions of the Orality Movement represent a serious attack on God's Word. The tragedy is that many true Christians are being deceived and misled by the persuasive promotion of the storytelling agenda. As reformed Christians we must warn our brothers and sisters in Christ, especially those in the Third World, of the dangers of this movement. As Martin Luther opposed the darkness of Rome, so today we must oppose the

darkness of Lausanne and its Orality Movement. We live in a time when there is a great hunger for the truth of God's Word and the doctrines of the truth faith.

ⁱ Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 30, Globalization and the Gospel: Rethinking Mission in the Contemporary World, produced by the Issue Group on this topic at the 2004 Forum for World Evangelization hosted by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization in Pattaya, Thailand, September 29 to October 5, 2004

ⁱⁱ Ibid. Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 30

ⁱⁱⁱ Lausanne World Plus, What Do You Think, Mr. Gutenberg? The Challenges Print Evangelism Ministries Face in Meeting the Needs of Oral Cultures, Avery Willis and James Greenelsh, October 2006

^{iv} The International Orality Network, Orality issues, Communication - "Knock, knock"

^v *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization and International Orality Network, 2005, p3-4

^{vi} Ibid. *Making Disciples*, p.4

^{vii} Ibid. p.6

^{viii} Ibid. p.75

^{ix} Ibid. p.117

^x Ibid. p.124

^{xi} Website of StoryRunners, a ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ, Storytelling Tip Sheet

^{xii} Ibid. *Making Disciples*, pp.57-58

^{xiii} Ibid. p.62

^{xiv} Ibid. p.72

^{xv} Ibid. p.24

^{xvi} Ibid, p.21

^{xvii} Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy – The Technologizing of the Word*, Routledge, first published 1982, reprinted 2000, p5

^{xviii} Ibid. *Orality and Literacy*, p.9

^{xix} Ibid. *Orality and Literacy*, p.10

^{xx} Ong, 1978, p.129, cited from 'Biases of the Ear and Eye' by Daniel Chandler

^{xxi} Ibid. *Orality and Literacy*, p.81 and p.101

^{xxii} International Orality Network website, Task Forces, Music and Arts,

^{xxiii} Cape Town 2010 website, Video, Quote from 'Communicating to Oral Learners - Introduction and Transitions',

<http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/11520>

^{xxiv} The Cape Town Commitment: a confession of faith and a call to action, Discerning the will of Christ for world evangelization, Oral cultures,

<http://www.lausanne.org/ctcommitment>
