

BY 2050: PREPARING EFFECTIVE PREACHERS FOR AN EMERGING SECONDARY ORAL SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

By 2050 America will be remarkably different in significant ways. Current trends, if unabated, portend a minority-majority population with secondary orality firmly entrenched and biblical illiteracy continuing to spread. This year's youngest Bible college and seminary graduates will be in their mid to late fifties in 2050. To assist today's professors of homiletics in their preparation of preachers who will remain effective leading up to the mid-century and beyond, this paper explores what an emerging secondary orality requires of biblical preaching. Following an overview of orality's primary features and a brief reconsideration of the orality inherent in the Bible and preaching act itself, the paper offers a set of admonitions to guide the student-preacher destined to face secondary oral audiences.

"Tell me the facts and I'll learn. Tell me the truth and I'll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever." – Native American Proverb

INTRODUCTION

Predicting the future is a precarious business, but that hasn't stopped economists, sociologists, and others with a vested interest in the future from trying. Government groups and research agencies have generally selected 2050 as the year to look towards, which has had a cascading effect. "Once a major organization sets their research parameters to that year," explains Zoe Schlanger of *Newsweek*, "it makes good organizational sense for other organizations to use the basis of that research to do the same for their respective topic."¹¹²

Two predictions from sociologists looking ahead to the mid-21st century deserve the special attention of homileticians currently teaching in the United States. Ruy Teixeira, senior fellow at both the Century Foundation and the Center for American Progress, predicts minorities will make up more than half the nation by 2050.¹¹³ James Slack, addressing workshop participants at the 2003 International Orality Network Conference, reported 20 million people join the ranks of

¹¹² Zoe Schlanger, "Forget 2015 – 2050 Is the Year for Predictions," 4 January 2015, *Newsweek*, <http://www.newsweek.com/forget-2015-2050-year-predictions-296481>, retrieved 29 January 2018.

¹¹³ Ruy Teixeira, "When Will Your State Become Majority-Minority?" 8 May 2013, <http://www.thinkprogress.org>, retrieved 19 November 2017.

the functionally non-literate every year, so that by 2050 the functionally non-literate will outnumber the population of all people living today.¹¹⁴

Currently, the Center for Intercultural Training claims, 5.7 billion people (80% of the world's population) are oral learners either because they are illiterate or their reading comprehension is inadequate. In America, 14% of the population may be classified as illiterate, 29% as functionally illiterate, 44% as preferred oral learners, and only 13% as highly literate.¹¹⁵

This year's youngest Bible college and seminary graduates will be in their mid to late fifties in 2050. To engender their renewed appreciation for and confidence in preaching as an oral act and, more practically, to prepare them to preach effectively in the mid-century and beyond, we, their professors of homiletics, must think critically about what will be required for effective biblical preaching in a minority-majority nation of secondary oral and biblically illiterate peoples. To that end the following paper overviews orality's primary features and the state of orality in present day America, revisits the orality inherent in the Bible and preaching act, then concludes by offering a set of admonitions to guide the student-preacher destined to face secondary oral audiences.

COMING TO TERMS WITH ORALITY

Aristotle defines spoken words as “symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sound.”¹¹⁶ Leonard Bloomfield helpfully adds in *Language*, “Writing is not language, but merely a means of recording language by visible marks.”¹¹⁷ Of the thousands of languages spoken throughout history, “only around 106 have ever been committed to writing to a degree sufficient to have produced literature, and most have never been written at all.”¹¹⁸ The fundamental orality, as opposed to literacy, of language is inescapable and permanent. Words were meant to be spoken first, written later, if ever.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ James Slack, *Introduction to Orality*, The International Orality Network Conference Workshop, Dallas, TX, 2003; cited in Charles Madinger, “A Literate’s Guide to the Oral Galaxy,” in *Orality Journal* 2, no. 2 (2013), 19.

¹¹⁵ Center for Intercultural Training, “Resources4missions,” <http://resources4missions.org>, retrieved 12 July 2018. Statistics on American literacy come from the National Assessment of Adult Literacy survey conducted by the U. S. government in 1992 and 2003, as reported by the Center for Intercultural Training.

¹¹⁶ Aristotle, *Categories and De Interpretatione*, trans. with notes by J. L. Ackrill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 43; quoted in Ronald Bush, “A Holistic Strategy for the Evangelization of Oral Learners” (Ph.D. diss., Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015), 65.

¹¹⁷ Leonard Bloomfield, *Language* (New York: Henry Holt, 1933), 21; quoted in Bush, 65.

¹¹⁸ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (New York: Routledge, 1982), 7.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8, maintains, “Writing can never dispense with orality.... Oral expression can exist and mostly has existed without any writing at all, writing never without orality.”

That which is written is fundamentally different from that which is spoken. The cultures and worldviews spawned by literacy and orality are likewise different, a fact often overlooked by literate society members.¹²⁰ The table below highlights some of those differences.¹²¹

Oral Cultures		Textual Cultures
Spoken Storyline Concrete	<i>Communication</i>	Written Outline Abstract
Communal	<i>Lifestyle</i>	Institutional
Social Dimensions	<i>Time and Space</i>	Mathematical Dimensions
Immediate	<i>Gratification</i>	Deferred
Circular Conceptual	<i>Life Perspective</i>	Linear Historical
Group Oriented Apprenticeship Teacher is Valued Mnemonic Devices	<i>Learning Patterns</i>	Individually Oriented Textbook Information is Valued Archived Text
Words are: Events/Alive/Attached	<i>Lexicon</i>	Words are: Objects/Dead/Detached

The ranks of the “non-literate” are estimated to swell worldwide by twenty million annually. Researchers would classify relatively few of those peoples as primarily oral. In a *primary* oral society, visual representations of spoken language are unknown. Literacy is virtually absent. In *residually* oral societies literacy has been introduced and integrated, but orality remains the primary means whereby people process and image information. In *secondary* oral societies people have transitioned from a print-oriented culture back to an oral framework. The use of advanced technologies to diffuse messages embedded in story, music, and/or drama in culturally relevant expressions is evidence of a second orality.¹²² Although those few people creating and manipulating the technologies to relay their messages are highly literate, not so the masses who rely on those technologies for their information.¹²³

¹²⁰ Members of the International Orality Network and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization claim in *Making Disciples of Oral Learners* (Hong Kong: ION/LCWE, 2005), 5, “All societies, including those having a highly literate segment, have oral communication at their core. Oral communication is the basic function on which writing and literacy is based. When literacy persists in a culture for generations, it begins to change the way people think, act and communicate—so much so that the members of that literate society may not even realize how their communication styles are different from those of the majority of the world who are oral communicators.”

¹²¹ This table, found in Bush, 72, is based on multiple sources, especially Charles Madinger, “Coming to Terms with Orality: A Holistic Model,” *Missiology: An International Review* 38, no. 2 (April 2010), 203; and William C. Parker, “Cultural and Academic Stress Imposed on Afro-Americans: Implications for Educational Change,” Princeton: E.R.I.C., #ED134646, <http://www.eric.ed.gov>, 5. Only the line marked “Time and Space” require explanation. Bush, 78, clarifies, for people in an oral culture “time and space are anchored to human interaction and community.” But for people in textual cultures “time is a linear progression of quantifiable moments, and space is a mathematical assessment of intervals between points.” A biblical example of the former, i.e., relative dating, practiced by oral cultures can be seen in Isa. 6:1: “In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord.”

¹²² Madinger, “Coming to Terms with Orality,” 211.

America is quickly becoming a secondary oral society. For a rapidly growing percentage of her populace the “Guttenberg Parenthesis” is closed.¹²⁴ Appearing in print no longer guarantees a claim’s veracity.¹²⁵ So while many Americans can read at some level, they gather and process most of what they know and believe within an oral framework. In that framework, community, immediacy, personality, and story are fundamental.

- Community: reality is interpreted, communicated, and validated communally rather than individually.
- Immediacy: words refer to real, familiar experiences and live “in the moment” rather than to disembodied abstractions that reside “on a page.”
- Personality: the interpreter’s relationship with the audience is as important as the message, if not more so, because he/she is the perceived “author”ity of the message.
- Story: abstractions / principles, where they exist, derive from story; story, not principle, is primary.¹²⁶

Missiologists over the past quarter century have been studying the implications of orality, and storytelling especially, for sake of greater effectiveness in evangelism, discipleship, and church planting.¹²⁷ They are now recognizing how an “unconscious textuality bias so dominates [their] pedagogical theory and practice that it suffocates any breath of air that [their] oral tradition

¹²³ It’s important to note that literacy doesn’t vanish in a secondary oral society. As Ong, 11, makes clear, this “new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print.” Yet, at the same time in modern America, fewer and fewer people are taking time to type a question then “Google” the internet for an answer to read but instead call out to a voice-activated device, “Hey, Siri...” or “OK, Google...” then listen for a response.

¹²⁴ The concept of a “Guttenberg Parenthesis” was formulated by L. O. Sauerberg of the University of Southern Denmark. Professor Thomas Pettit, of the same university, describes the “parenthesis” as “the idea that oral culture was in a way interrupted by Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press and the roughly 500 years of print dominance; a dominance now being challenged in many ways by digital culture and the orality it embraces.” See Greg Peverill-Conti and Brad Seawell, “The Guttenberg Parenthesis: Oral Traditions and Digital Technologies,” 1 April 2010, <https://commforum.mit.edu/the-guttenberg-parenthesis-oral-tradition-and-digital-technologies-29e1a4fde271>, retrieved 26 January 2018.

¹²⁵ “Thomas Pettit on the Guttenberg Parenthesis,” Vimeo, <https://vimeo.com/10705406>, retrieved 26 January 2018, maintains that during that parenthetical period people were keen on categorizing. Information found in books was categorized as truth. The devolution of print media—from books to paperbacks to newspapers to desktop publishing—combined with the evolution of modern technologies, especially the internet, has caused people to question once again “what is truth?” “Print,” says Pettit, “is no longer a guarantee of truth, and speech no longer undermines truth.”

¹²⁶ Lynne Abney’s “Orality Assessment Tool” (www.story4glory.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Orality_Assessment_Tool_Worksheet1.pdf, retrieved 16 July 2018) teases out the differences between oral and print communicators according to basic learning preferences, the importance of sound, importance of real-life experience, style preference, importance of dialogue, importance of drama and melodrama, and importance of context.

¹²⁷ It was a colleague, Mark Morris, who has served abroad and stateside as a missionary under the auspices of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and who teaches missions-related courses at the author’s college, that first questioned him about “oral homiletics.” This same colleague later shared several resources from the field of missiology on the subject of orality, including a copy of Bush’s Ph.D. dissertation—one of two primary sources for the first half of this paper.

partners and oral-preference learners might take on their own.”¹²⁸ Homiletics desiring to train effective preachers for an emerging secondary oral society should take note of their findings. Being highly literate ourselves, we must, like our missionary colleagues, beware the assumption that if we “can just simplify [our] outlines and exposition oral learners can grasp what [we] are saying.”¹²⁹

The time has come for us, too, to consider the implications of the Bible’s and preaching’s oral nature and the place of story therein. Orality is not equivalent to storytelling, as the former is an orientation, a culture, and a framework / worldview of cognitive processes, media, relational networks, and ways of structuring content.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, stories are an important part of orality and central to life as we know it. Stories are a powerful means to inspire worship, facilitate evangelism, offer ministry, build fellowship, and inform discipleship—the very meta-purposes of preaching.

What are the outstanding features of orality for which preachers ought to account? They are not, according to the International Orality Network and Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, “crucially or exclusively associated with what is spoken by mouth. They are, instead a correlation of ways of processing that are common to face-to-face, highly relational societies. The correlation of ways of processing and communicating involve *concrete [rather than abstract] notions; sequential [rather than random] expression of events; and relational [as opposed to individualist] contexts*” [emphasis mine].¹³¹ Before delving into what all this means for today’s American preacher, we would benefit from a quick reminder that the Bible and act of preaching are orally-intensive.

RESPECTING THE “INSPIRED” NATURE OF THE BIBLE AND PREACHING

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,” meaning, naturally, inspiration preceded inscripturation. God breathed out before any author wrote down. Those holy men of old somehow “heard” before they recorded.

In the beginning God spoke the world into existence and breathed life into Adam. Pagan gods are mute and lifeless, but the true God speaks and enlivens (1 Corinthians 12:2). Little wonder then that the Bible, His special revelation, is steeped in orality. It records the triune God speaking to Himself and to His creation; men and women speaking to God and one another. The Bible’s

¹²⁸ Madinger, “A Literate’s Guide to the Oral Galaxy,” 19. Madinger proceeds by lamenting, “We eliminated icons from the Eastern Church, physical gestures from the Latin Church, rhythm and drumming from African cultures, and the ties to our ancestors from our Asian brothers and sisters.” Writing on literacy’s power to bind, Ong, 12, states, “Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field forever.... [A] literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what [a] word is to purely oral people.”

¹²⁹ ION/LCWE, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, 23.

¹³⁰ Madinger, “Coming to Terms with Orality,” 204. Likewise, “literacy is far more than the technologies of writing and reading. It is also the ability to understand and use the information conveyed through the terms and concepts that compromise a message” (ibid., 206).

¹³¹ ION/LCWE, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, 48.

kings and prophets, psalmists and the Savior, all are made known to us primarily through the words they spoke. On top of that, behind many of the Bible's books stands an oral tradition—eventually reduced to print but revived again when the Bible is read to listening congregations.

Homiletics relates directly to one's views on the nature of Scripture's inspiration and is defined by how those views shape one's philosophy and practices in sacred proclamation. As Haddon Robinson asserts in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, "Expository preaching... emerges not merely as a type of sermon—one among many—but as the theological outgrowth of a high view of inspiration."¹³²

The Bible makes much of the spoken word. Spoken words make up much of the Bible. Preaching itself is an oral act. It therefore follows that biblical preaching is naturally suited to communicate effectively to an oral society, especially when the preacher takes seriously and accounts for the inherent orality of Scripture and respects the listening needs of *hearers*.

ADMONITIONS FOR STUDENTS ASPIRING TO PREACH EFFECTIVELY IN 2050 (AND THOSE WHO CURRENTLY TEACH THEM)

In view of the foregoing, professors of homiletics should ask: How can we train today's student-preachers to capitalize on the inherent oral nature of the Bible and the preaching act so as to preach effectively to an emerging secondary oral and biblically illiterate society? The following admonitions offer a starting point. They derive from the correlative ways of processing and communicating in an oral culture cited earlier, respect for the place of story in an oral culture, or both.

Before proceeding, a word of caution is in order. Just as Paul's one-off sermon on Mars Hill was contextually appropriate but an unlikely representation of how he addressed the disciples over a two-year period at the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9-10),¹³³ the admonitions that follow are particularly designed for preachers addressing a biblically illiterate, likely unregenerate, secondary oral audience. They would require modification when regularly addressing biblically literate, presumably spiritually mature, disciples.¹³⁴

¹³² Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus, eds., *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 803.

¹³³ Charles R. Swindoll, *The Church Awakening: An Urgent Call for Renewal* (New York: Faith Works, 2010), 107.

¹³⁴ Missiologists engaged in studies on orality insist orality strategies are essential for evangelism and, following that, a bridge or gateway to written Scripture. According to Ong, 14-15, literacy remains essential "for the development of... [an] explicative understanding of literature and of any art...." Moreover, "There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world today that is not aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy." One such power is the ability to develop a comprehensive theology following a "sustained reflection on the whole of Scripture." (Anthony Francis Casey, "How Shall They Hear? The Interface of Urbanization and Orality in North American Ethnic Church Planting" [Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013], 178.) This inherent limitation of orality points to the need for preaching strategies that go beyond the strictly narrative.

Prepare to address hearers rather than readers.

Sermons are meant to be heard. Only a small percentage make it into print. Fewer still are actually ever read. It's a vain mistake for preachers, often the young, to think of themselves on any given week as preparing a sermon that will speak to the ages. Chances are their sermons will be all but forgotten before nightfall.¹³⁵ Better to think about those few listening souls who will actually occupy the pews from 11 to 12 on Sunday morning than a reading public beyond the walls whom the preacher will never meet and doesn't exist.

Contemporary hearers are all about "instancy" and intimacy. For them sound and image have largely replaced the printed word. Seeing, not reading, is their new basis for believing.¹³⁶ Sermons that effectively address such hearers use concrete imagery, flow narratively, and are highly relational. They "move," to borrow from David Buttrick's *Homiletic*, into and out of one thought after another rather than break down the points of an outline. They don't unravel a pericope's details as much as they stitch together the pericope's ideas in the hearer's heart.¹³⁷ They draw in listeners, transforming distant observers of texts into virtual participants in the texts' actions. They invite attention not *to* a text but *through* a text to realities beyond.

Hearers expect more than readers. They study a speaker's facial expressions and track closely his hand gestures, therefore it behooves preachers to work on their delivery. The biggest barrier, literally and figuratively speaking, to effective sermon delivery for many is the pulpit. By simply resting his hands on it, the preacher limits his gestures which, in turn, inhibits his facial expressions. One of the surest ways to overcoming this barrier is to take one step back from the pulpit. The absence of a handrest forces the preacher to think about what he's doing with his hands, which, in turn, shapes his countenance. These together work with the tone of his voice, each playing off the other, to enhance his message.

Use concrete images.

Missionary Elizabeth Wilson recalls the moment she realized she was living among an oral people group in the mountains of South Asia. Her colleague had asked their language helper for the equivalent for three shapes in the local language. For the square he used the word for handkerchief; for the circle, a word naming a round flat bread eaten by the people; and for the triangle, a mountain.¹³⁸ The names for the shapes were concrete images.

¹³⁵ Sermons are a type of oration, and as such are subject to the same limitations. Per Ong, 141, an oration "addresses itself to a particular situation and, in the total absence of writing, disappears from the human scene for good with the situation itself."

¹³⁶ Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in Christian Ministry* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 127; quoted ION/LCWE, 59.

¹³⁷ Ong, 13.

A growing number of terms commonly used in preaching today are for post-Christian, biblically illiterate, secondary oral hearers too abstract and therefore confusing.¹³⁹ Temptation, sin, gospel, born again? What do these terms mean to them? What do they convey to the young people in our pews?¹⁴⁰

Jesus' response to Nicodemus' confusion over the phrase "born again" in John 3:3 is instructive. Note how He, after marveling over His interlocutor's lack of understanding (willful or not), moved down the ladder of abstraction to remind Nicodemus of what was for him a familiar story centered around a concrete image—a serpent cast in bronze (verse 14). Here Jesus related an abstract idea to a story, a symbol, and a ritual, that is, the people looking to the serpent in faith. All of which leads to the next admonition.

*Integrate symbols and rituals.*¹⁴¹

Here are two means used throughout Scripture and by oral cultures still to retell and reinforce their stories and the worldviews they're meant to instill. The Passover lamb of the Old Testament and Christ's cross in the New are profound symbols tied to key narratives. Gathering for worship on Sunday and opening the Bible together are rituals pointing to the story of Christ's resurrection and our duty to submit to God's word.

For the author personally, the most memorable sermon delivered in recent years by the Evangelical Homiletics Society's outgoing presidents came from Abe Kuruvilla. Expounding the story of David and Goliath, Abe wryly likened David to Spiderman and Goliath to Batman. The symbols were immediately striking and relatable for this fan of comic book heroes. Then, to make his sermon even more memorable, Abe concluded by explaining the meaning of and reinterpreting the sign of the cross while performing the ritual associated with it. "God came from Heaven to earth, to move us from the kingdom of darkness to the Kingdom of light," or "God fights for me," he illustrated while crossing himself. Symbols and rituals such as these aren't soon forgotten, thereby giving the Spirit a greater opportunity to transform the hearer through his recollection of the stories and the sermons tied to them.

¹³⁸ Elizabeth Wilson, "Breakthroughs," in *Orality Breakouts: Using Heart Language to Transform Hearts*, Samuel E. Chiang, ed., (Hong Kong: ION/LCWE, 2010), 27; quoted in Bush, 186.

¹³⁹ Ong, 8, maintains that "abstractly sequential, classificatory, explanatory examination of phenomena or of stated truths is impossible without writing and reading." In short, much of our current stock in trade as expository preachers requires literate hearers.

¹⁴⁰ Consider "born again," an abstruse term from the moment Jesus coined it in John 3. Nicodemus, the religious scholar who first heard the expression, didn't "get it." Two millennia of biblical scholars have struggled to unpack it. To this day we disagree over many of the finer (and not so fine) points of John 3:1-21. Some of those contentious points being: whether Jesus meant "born again" or "born from above;" what it means to be "born of water and the Spirit;" to whom Jesus (or John?) was referring by His use of "we" in v. 11; whether Nicodemus was truly ignorant or obstinately refusing to accept Jesus' words (v. 12); where Jesus' dialog with Nicodemus ends and John's exposition begins (vv. 16-21); if "whosoever" (v. 16) includes everyone or only the elect; whether v. 18 teaches an unconditional eternal security.

¹⁴¹ Symbols may be visual, i.e., objects, or verbal, i.e., metaphors.

Identify then adapt or replace the text's mnemonic devices.

Skilled storytellers make their narratives memorable through repetition, wordplay, exaggeration, humor, and other mnemonic devices. Skilled exegesis of a biblical pericope will reveal any number of mnemonic devices, including parallelism, chiasm, wordplay, alliteration, and so forth. The intended audiences who first *heard* those pericopes were, we'd assume, better prepared to "catch" and be aided by those embedded devices than today's hearers listening to the text in another language. Therefore, it's important for today's preacher to identify his text's aids to memory during the exegetical stage of his preparation then to determine during the homiletical stage whether those same aids will enhance his audience's ability to remember the affected parts of the passage, whether those aids can be effectively adapted, or whether they should be replaced altogether with other aids in the sermon.

If one's definition of biblical inspiration includes God inspiring the selection of mnemonic devices used by the Bible's authors, the last course of action suggested in the preceding paragraph will seem suspect if not patently unacceptable. If so, that preacher must decide whether he's serving his text and audience most faithfully by 1) explaining its mnemonic devices that fail to aid contemporary memories, or by 2) creating new devices that will help contemporary hearers recall what his text's author was attempting to make memorable. Robinson's highly regarded definition of expository preaching suggests that clearly and memorably communicating a pericope's idea(s) is of greater importance than using the same aids the writer used to drive home those ideas originally.

Preach the stories.

Earlier generations of preachers might be excused for avoiding the Bible's narratives, as they assumed their hearers were already well-versed in those stories' details from their time in Sunday school. But declining attendance there, eventuating in many churches' decision to eliminate Sunday school for adults, if not everyone, has contributed to a widespread biblical illiteracy that robs the 21st century preacher of our forebears' excuse.

Every genre of Scripture has its value. That rich diversity contributes to the Bible's overall profitability (2 Tim. 3:16). And yet, stories, comprising more than 40% of the Bible's contents, transcend culture and time unlike some of those other genres. Ever appropriate, but especially so in an emergent second orality, we must preach the stories.

Preach the stories as stories.

We do the sacred storytellers a great disservice when we quickly summarize their narratives' contents so that we can move on to the more serious work of distilling their accounts into a set of propositions or life principles. As Robinson once reminded the author, "If Moses had wanted to

give us eight principles on leadership, he could have given us eight principles. Instead, he gave us stories.”

A failure to spend adequate time retelling a story removes it from what Zack Eswine calls its “context of reality.” One of the results is “expository equivocations,” whereby the preacher infuses words grounded in physical reality with metaphysical, psychological, or personal internal meanings. For example, the pit into which Joseph was cast becomes a metaphor for stress, financial struggles, troubled relationships, etc.¹⁴²

Much has been written already on the subjects of preaching narratives and preaching narratively.¹⁴³ Here the emphasis is on the latter, of thinking of the sermon as a self-contained story—with a beginning, plot, and end—instead of an introduction leading to a handful of propositions and conclusion.

Good stories flow, as should good sermons. This doesn’t mean that every narrative-based sermon must unpack a story in chronological order. That’s what textual cultures expect, observes Ong, whereas oral cultures are comfortable with storytellers who start in the middle of the action then explain precipitating events.¹⁴⁴

Effective storytellers aren’t bound to a particular ordering of events, nor do they separate their tales’ morals from the flow of their tales’ action. Rather, their “points” emerge naturally and impress themselves upon hearers’ hearts subtly. By this their carefully developed skill they turn voluntary attention into involuntary. Their hearers don’t make themselves listen. They can’t help but listen! And simply by listening, they’re transformed.¹⁴⁵

Here’s another reason for preaching the Bible’s stories in a narrative format. Doing so not only shows respect for their author’s choice of genre and context of reality, it’s an effective means of reshaping the hearer’s worldview. Personal transformation takes place when one worldview replaces another. Worldview is one’s conception of life’s metanarrative. That metanarrative is a collection of smaller, interconnected narratives that seemingly make sense of the world—its

¹⁴² Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 28-35.

¹⁴³ See, for example, Steven D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); Ralph L. and Gregg Lewis, *Inductive Preaching: Helping People Listen* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1983); Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) and *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); David L. Larsen, *Telling the Old, Old Story: The Art of Narrative Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995); Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001).

¹⁴⁴ Ong, *Orality and Textuality*, 139-47.

¹⁴⁵ Helpful resources for honing one’s storytelling skills include John Walsh, *The Art of Storytelling: Easy Steps to Presenting an Unforgettable Story* (Chicago: Moody, 2003) and accompanying workshops, examples, and tips at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zVzn_P-aMM&list=PLMgRojzaGeTtNVxrNzYzJKWXzjt82Hr12. Walsh’s websites www.bibletelling.org and www.btstories.com include his telling of 260 Bible stories, helpful “story insights,” and other tools. The International Storytelling Center (www.storytellingcenter.net), located in Jonesborough, Tennessee, hosts an annual storytelling festival and storytellers in-residence throughout the year.

origin, current state, hope, and end. “Every culture uses stories to tell us what it means to be human, what kind of world we live in, why there is suffering and pain, and what, if anything, we can do to deal with that suffering and pain.”¹⁴⁶ So it is stories, says N. T. Wright, that are “actually, peculiarly good at modifying or subverting other stories and their worldviews.”¹⁴⁷ To change the world one must change its narrative. “Stories create worlds. Tell the story differently and you change the world. And that’s what Jesus aimed to do.”¹⁴⁸ To evangelize is to present an alternative story—God’s story. It’s a story of star wars—of darkness versus light; of God’s empire striking back through Israel, the incarnation, and the church; and of the long anticipated triumphant return of Jesus. The gospel is, to borrow from Scot McKnight, the story of King Jesus.¹⁴⁹

Missiologists have discovered that when preaching gives only propositional truth and doesn’t present biblical stories to challenge existing worldviews, it runs the risk of syncretism. “The cultural stories will continue to comprise the heart of the [hearer’s] worldview and discipleship will deal only with” the hearer’s behavior, values, and beliefs.¹⁵⁰ This realization underscores what Wright stated so memorably, “Tell someone to do something, and you change their life—for a day; tell someone a story and you change their life.”¹⁵¹

Start with the story they know and tell them the story they don’t.

Isn’t that precisely what Peter did in the first Christian sermon at Pentecost? He started with the rumors of his drunkenness, turned back to Joel and David in Israel’s history, and related it all to Christ’s resurrection story. Paul did something similar at Mars Hill. By changing the narrative they challenged the way their hearers had always conceived of their worlds, the first step on their road to transformation.

Preach the backstory when there is no immediately visible story.

¹⁴⁶ ION/LCWE, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, 35.

¹⁴⁷ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 40. Ong, 140, similarly observes, “knowledge and discourse come out of human experience and that the elemental way to process human experience verbally is to give an account of it more or less as it really comes into being and exists, embedded in the flow of time. Developing a story line is a way of dealing with this flow.”

¹⁴⁸ Tom Wright, *The Original Jesus: The Life and Vision of a Revolutionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 36.

¹⁴⁹ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

¹⁵⁰ ION/LCWE, *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, 36-37.

¹⁵¹ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 40. In ways I’m sure I still don’t realize, I continue to be shaped by the Bible stories and comic books of my youth.

All of the Bible's commandments, poetry, oracles, and letters grew out of a story clearly indicated in their surrounding contexts or in the larger sweep of redemptive history.¹⁵² This is the backstory that illumines and makes relatable the non-narrative portions of Scripture.

In his later years especially, Robinson proved himself a master not only at handling the Bible's narrative texts but at adeptly communicating non-narrative pericopes in a way that interwove their particulars with the story behind or sublimated in them. His sermons *The Testimony of J. B. Work* (the poetry of Job), *Scandal in the Parsonage* (the prophecy of Hosea), and *Put That on Master Charge* (the epistle to Philemon) are particularly noteworthy in this regard.

CONCLUSION

The Bible is predominantly recorded orality. Preaching is preeminently oral exposition of the Bible. It follows that biblical preaching will remain a potentially effective means of communicating divine truth to an emerging secondary oral American society. The extent to which today's student-preachers are able to tap into that potential leading up to 2050 and beyond will depend largely on how well we their homiletics professors acquaint them with the primary features of orality and equip them with strategies for addressing secondary oral listeners.

Orality is about more than storytelling, as important as story is in the emerging culture. It involves a different way of processing information which emphasizes concrete (rather than abstract) notions; sequential (rather than random) expressions of events; and relational (as opposed to individualist) contexts. Oral peoples value community, immediacy, personality, and, yes, story. Effective will the preacher be who is prepared to preach accordingly.

¹⁵² Ibid., 39: "Even at its most proverbial and epigrammatic, Jewish writing retains the underlying substructure of the Jewish story about the covenant god, the world, and Israel." Ong, 140: "Behind even the abstractions of science, there lies narrative of the observations on the basis of which the abstractions have been formulated.... Behind proverbs and aphorisms and philosophical speculation and religious ritual lies the memory of human experience strung out in time and subject to narrative treatment."