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SYMPOSIUM: Has the Use of Orality Been Taken Too Far?

Wes Seng

AS A TEACHER, privileged to work among indigenous people for almost forty years, I am uneasy with a recent trend in teaching curriculum for tribal people. I refer to the issue of *orality*, which welcomed in a fresh view for biblical training among traditional groups. Yet the issue today has caused disharmony rather than progress among Christian teachers. I wish to make some observations on orality and literacy and share insights learned, frequently after making mistakes. As I write this, I have in my mind students emerging from tribal contexts who come to a formal program of Bible education and ministry. It does not deal with initial biblical instruction in a tribe.



Because there were obvious flaws in going cold turkey by teaching people from an oral tradition using linear/literacy methods, the pendulum has now swung to excess on the opposite side. The cry is '*back to orality.*' Literacy is now getting bad press as somehow irrelevant to tribal people; in some cases, the linear/literacy form of learning is being discarded altogether. Yet I have heard indigenous brothers lament being denied skills or disciplines which would aid them in continuing education in other fields. They feel 'stereotyped' and confined to roles suited only for orally-oriented lifestyles.

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Orality, although obviously important, should in no way confine a learner to one method of growth. *Orality is not a method of learning. It is a method of communication.* We must not confuse these two concepts. After all, a method of communication is the way we transmit information from one person to another, but the hearer may not be learning. *Literacy is also a method of communication: both methods can be classified as communication phenomena.*

Learning depends on whether or not the listener has been programmed to learn by the communication mode being used. God used at least two very distinct methods of

Orality and these *should never be pitted one against the other as opposing values* or as *incompatible*. Neither is anyone's exclusive birthright. As communication methods, orality and literacy greatly complement and enhance one another and should be used to advantage in our teaching institutions.

Orality, a communication phenomenon as old as Genesis and human community, produces a cyclical learning system. Since literacy is nonexistent in many tribal situations, principles and teaching are communicated by storytelling and listeners grasp content by the repetition of stories, growing in their knowledge as they mature through life stages. I must claim roots in orality. On our family's ranch in Montana, I learned ranching skills by my dad's storehouse of repeated stories.

Worldwide attention has turned to orality today because a large part of the world communicates by this system. A new awareness has led some academicians to believe the original learning format should be maintained for learning to continue. I cannot agree. Rather, I believe that transition courses for new learners should be purposefully worked into a curriculum early on.

Those who learn by reading do so because they were programmed to do so. Yet knowing how to read is not synonymous to learning.

Let me clarify: *Literacy, a communication phenomenon, produces a linear learning system.* By literacy one can learn progressively and use excellent reference books to verify what was learned. By literacy one also can move on to the next level of understanding in the subject at hand. *Linear is the method of learning; literacy communicates the information.* Those who learn by reading do so because they were programmed to do so. Yet knowing how to read is not synonymous to learning.

Although tribal people have some 'catching up' to do when they transition into a new system, they are capable of learning in a new system. This was demonstrated frequently during my teaching experience with indigenous people. Students would learn to read; however, on a written test over the material supposedly studied and learned, they would read the written questions over and over and finally summon the teacher and say, "I don't understand this question."

When I read the question, the student would brighten up and say, "Oh, is that what it says!" This happened repeatedly. They had learned to read and formulate the words, but they did not add meaning to them until they heard the words. When the teacher spoke the words, their meaning was understood. In time, they themselves learned to give meaning to the words they read.

However, the belief that cyclical learners should remain in that form of oral learning indefinitely should not be entertained. *A very important portion of God's revelation to us can only be learned through the linear method of learning.* Sound principles of teaching oblige a curriculum to begin at the stage where the learners are. However, new learners should not be thought of as deficient or psychologically bound to one mode of learning; they are able to grow in their mental processes and adapt to the literary tradition of communication and most desperately desire to do so.

There should be no hesitation or *lack of urgency* on the part of teachers to aid cyclical learners to adapt to literacy and the linear method of learning as soon as possible. *For*

Learning to happen, one need not “go back to orality”; aid must be given to cyclical-oriented learners in their transition to linear learning so they can take advantage of both traditions for the glory of God.

If scripture exclusively limited itself to using story form, it would be obvious this was God’s favored (divine) way of communication. Certainly, scripture contains a large portion of valuable lessons in ancient history in story form. Orality as a method of communication was prominent and preeminent at that time. Moses received his information of ancient history in the oral tradition under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. *However, once the accounts were registered in written form, they became available through literary communication.* Orality joined hands with literacy.

Most of us from Haugan, Montana, would have opted for orality in our younger days. We had little use for stuffy libraries when there was all the beauty of Montana to explore. But a day arrived when life’s hard questions began to gnaw at my mind and I yearned for deeper truths that could offer direction in life.



And I cannot believe that tribal people are much different from this kid from Haugan. If they are made in the image of God, they are capable of sharing the same deep yearnings for knowing God that I had. Nor can I believe they do not wrestle with some of the same deep questions asked by the literary world community. I cannot believe God gave some instructions to be understood only by those born into literacy.

In our sincere love and desire to communicate the gospel to tribal people, we could slide into ‘dumbing down’ the whole precious and living word of God in order to be politically correct or follow a current trend. I

believe that as both communication phenomena are used wisely, the Holy Spirit will do his part in translating truth to any mind. In fact, one of the first Suruí to encounter literacy expressed some amazing insights on Romans only a few years after coming to Ammi.

God probes our minds using linear thinking through didactic literary communication—line on line, precept on precept. Although the Old Testament was largely produced from oral tradition into a literary form, a very large portion of the instruction for the Church in the New Testament is presented for a linear style of learning. Unless there is a dedication to learning through a linear mode, many New Testament truths are lost to someone confined to the oral tradition.

One of the difficulties in oral tradition is that invariably human memory fails. Although an unwritten law in some oral tradition is that the story must be told identically every time, I would wager that most stories repeated around tribal fires differ in a smaller or greater degree from the accounts of the great, great grandfathers, and I have heard indigenous brothers admit this problem.

Despite the best intentions, I doubt a person's ability to have perfect recall of an original story every time. However, God’s written word is sure and does not depend on fallible

R human memory. The story is always the same, and it needs to be the same because God's truths are not negotiable. They are eternal.

Scripture never assumes that some will not have the ability to deal with truth presented in a linear/literary tradition. God dared to challenge all his followers by giving us Romans, I Corinthians, Ephesians, James, and the other epistles. Just as people born into the literary tradition can transition over to learning in the orality form, people accustomed to cyclical learning can transition over and into the linear form of learning. Adhering religiously to a memorized oral system will hold back the progress of those hungry to learn.

Dr. Jim Slack gave excellent pointers to use when introducing the gospel to people from oral traditions in tribal settings. However, my concern lies in the school setting, where students come desiring literacy; the school curriculum must give students the opportunity to 'gently' move into the new learning style. Ample use of stories during the first year is appropriate; as students progress, a gradual moving to classes requiring linear type thinking is natural for biblical content.

A teacher is both a truth communicator and an enabler in the transitional expansion of learning methods.

A teacher is both a truth communicator and an enabler in the transitional expansion of learning methods. Linear truth can be introduced using a dual system that helps students attain a grasp of the truths available in linear, literary form not clearly expressed in the oral/cyclical traditions. A Bible school should provide the safe, yet challenging environment where this can happen.

In his research to explain the acquisition of human knowledge, developmental psychologist Jean Piaget discovered that in any new situation (where it may appear no understanding is taking place), the mind is learning (absorbing information) all along but requires *time* to create the necessary 'schemas' in order to organize the new data into a useful store of knowledge upon which to draw. Once there is sufficient organization, the mind makes a leap forward in its *organized understanding* of the knowledge received. Although his research was done mainly on children, the principles are applicable across the board. We witnessed this learning process in students time and again. When everything came together, they made a sudden leap forward in comprehension and learning.

The study of scripture using both learning methods is one of the best preparations for people from oral traditions for further education. This privilege is not confined to those reared in libraries. Thankfully, God endowed kids from Haugan and the Suruí and Peter with the ability to grapple with Paul's reasoning in order to come to full understanding (2 Pet. 3:16). Someone objecting to this view declared, "We are NOT preparing our students for university!"

While I agree a Bible school need not include disciplines such as math and physics, I would like to think that when a student completes the Bible curriculum, he or she would be at least as well *prepared in his or her ability to think* as I was when I finished high school.

God limited no part of his creation in such a way. The two main systems in discussion function well. Although many groups are still very oral in their learning style, in a rapidly-changing world, fewer will be in this situation tomorrow. We must help them make the transition in learning styles. A carefully planned 'transitional' Bible school curriculum has

R much to offer. The chasm between village life and the university is huge. A Bible institute can serve as a safety net for students crossing the bridge into a whole new tradition.

I make no claims to a comprehensive knowledge of tribal thinking. Yet I hear loud indigenous voices saying that future tribal dignity depends on education. Bible institutes must see the challenge as an opportunity to have a part in the intellectual and character formation of those who will influence their societies and may someday defend the gospel at a national level. Let's go for it.

Wes Seng works with Mission Resources International in Brazil. He helped establish and taught in three biblical discipleship centers for tribal people.

RESPONSE #1

Orality as Preparation for Reading?

Jackson Wu

THE CORRECTNESS OF Wes Seng's article is illustrated by the very fact we are able to have a conversation about the use of orality in a journal like *EMQ*. Had our parents kept us from getting an education beyond the third grade, readers would be ill-equipped to consider these key missiological issues (e.g., orality). Accordingly, I concur with Seng that we should not withhold from oral peoples the types of trainings that God has graciously given much of the Church.

By calling orality a "method of communication" rather than a "method of learning," Seng implicitly warns missionaries not to patronize oral peoples. Functionally, non-literate tribal peoples are no different than elementary school children, who, of course, were not born literate. Therefore, it is a blatant contradiction for missionaries to teach their own children while treating oral peoples as though they are unable to learn linear thinking.

Seng rightly argues against 'dumbing down' God's word by using only an oral method of communication. Many people object to oral approaches based on the impression that they minimize God's self-revelation in the epistles. This is certainly a danger if we are unwilling to help trainees develop their linear thinking.

How so? First, they will be less equipped to understand those more systematic, didactic passages, which God authoritatively inspired to be understood by his people.

Second and more subtly, those who advocate orality-only methods underestimate how God prepared writers like Paul to write their letters. Yes, even the book of Romans is rooted in various Old Testament stories; yet, his incisive presentation is only possible as a result of his prior literate-based training. Even in old age, Paul saw the impact of his "books, and above all the parchments" on his ministry (2 Tim. 4:13). In our own day, might we miss out on training Paul-type workers simply because we discourage or prevent literate/linear approaches to learning?

Ultimately, we mustn't forget that it is God who decided to change the world through the

R written word. Since Moses, God has not revealed himself merely through word of mouth. Rather than choosing either oral or literate methods, Seng urges us to embrace both. I further suggest that we even use our own literate learning to prepare stories and methods of storying that prepare oral people for the time when they might eventually read the Bible.

Jackson Wu (PhD) teaches theology and missiology in a seminary for Chinese church leaders. Previously, he also worked as a church planter. His second book, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization*, was released last year by William Cary Library. In addition to his published works, he maintains a blog at jacksonwu.org.

RESPONSE #2

Oftentimes, Orality Really Is the Best Method

Jerry Wiles

ONE OF THE INTERESTING THINGS about the orality movement is that there are numerous perspectives and opinions about it. I often hear or read various viewpoints and realize that our perspectives are usually based on our limited experiences and awareness. It is encouraging, however, to recognize that many times we can learn from others, even when we have different views and experiences.

One of the interesting observations about Wes Seng's article is his comment that, "Orality is not a method of learning. It is a method of communication." From my own experience and perspective, I would suggest that orality methods and strategies are very effective ways of communication and learning. I would also suggest that behavior change happens more effectively by orality ways and means than by text or print-based methods.

When we understand the depth, breadth, and multi-faceted aspects of the orality movement, we can appreciate the participatory and engaging parts of the oral arts. The oral arts are not just about a transfer of information, but are more relational, communal, and oral learner-friendly ways of communicating the gospel and making disciples. In our orality training with Living Water International, we emphasize that Jesus is our best model, throughout all of history, as an effective communicator, trainer, and disciple maker. He used stories and parables, asked questions, and created community and relationships in ways that were reproduced for 1,500 years. After the invention of the printing press, the Church became more dependent upon text-based communication and instruction, and neglected, in many ways, the most effective methods that people have used to communicate and learn from the beginning of time.

We are also realizing that there are many oral preference learners in the West. In fact, we are finding great interest in orality training among U.S.-based churches and ministries. Initially, pastors and church/mission leaders become interested because they are sending people on short-term mission trips. However, once they experience the training, they recognize that it is universal in its application and will work in local churches and

R communities.

I appreciate many of the insights that Mr. Seng shares in his article, and I'm reasonably confident that given the opportunity to discuss, compare thoughts, and experiences, there would be some agreement that it's not a matter of either print-based or orality-based methods, but the appropriate use according to the context of where one might be ministering.

A great resource we have available today is the collective knowledge and experience within groups such as the International Orality Network, the Global Orality Training Alliance, the Lausanne Movement, and others. Those of us who are involved in the orality movement are on an amazing learning journey and are passionate to share it with others. It is important for all of us to remain open to discovering different ways and means of advancing the Kingdom of God, as long as they are biblical, understandable, and reproducible.

Jerry Wiles, *president emeritus of Living Water International, became involved with orality in the 1980s. He has more than thirty-five years of experience in ministry and international mission work and currently serves on the International Orality Network Advisory Council and leads the Global Orality Training Alliance.*

RESPONSE #3

Allowing for Patience as We Navigate Orality and Linear Learning Systems *Paul Trinh*

I SYMPATHIZE WITH Wes Seng's struggle for a tribal student to study in a formal or westernized Bible education program. It is an ongoing struggle between orality and linear learning systems. Although the majority of the Bible is narrative, I agree with Seng that "a very important portion of God's revelation to us can only be learned through the linear method of learning." Thus, as Seng indicates, "Orality and literacy greatly complement and enhance one another."

Seng does mention that people need time to learn a concept. He believes that "when everything came together, they made a sudden leap forward in comprehension and learning." Nevertheless, waiting for such "leap" requires patience. We must not get upset while someone objects to linear learning for oral people.

I am talking to myself, as well. Being an advocate of Bible storytelling, I have trained individual believers and churches in the States and on various mission fields to take advantage of this ancient learning. Typically, new believers love to embrace storytelling, while traditional churches show hesitation and even objection. Such an attitude reminds me of the story of Jesus' disciples. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told them four times about his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection (16:21; 17:22; 20:18-19; 26:2). But the disciples just didn't understand. After the resurrection, some still doubted (Matt. 28:17). At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came and filled the disciples. Then, they boldly proclaimed the story of Jesus. They had made a sudden leap forward.

I am praying and waiting for more churches and believers to embrace Bible storytelling in their discipleship and witnessing. Similarly, one day church leaders will encourage tribal students to study in westernized Bible study programs.

Paul Trinh, a Bible storytelling coach and DMiss candidate, previously served as church planter, pastor, and missionary. He now pastors the Chinese Alliance Church of Pittsburgh.

RESPONSE #4

Looking Instead at What Each Method Offers Learners

Billy Coppedge

WES SENG'S ARTICLE rests on a central motivation to see transitional curriculum established within the formal Bible training and theological education environment. He wants students coming from primarily oral traditions to have access to initial oral training, but also the necessary (transitional) courses so that they can acquire the tools to experience the fruits of learning via literate/linear methods (Seng's terms). Certainly, Seng's desire for his students to have the maximum options available so they do not miss any opportunities in their Christian learning deserves commendation.

Curiously, one senses in Seng that to endorse oral methods implies a loss of access to the rich treasures presumably only available via literate/linear communication methods. This substantial concern cannot be lightly dismissed as printed resources do indeed serve as storehouses of knowledge, experiences, commentary, and memory that can only be unlocked by learning the 'local language' (understood as learning to read) or with the aid of an 'interpreter.'

While one can agree that literate resources offer certain advantages, a caution does need to be raised that in seeking to appreciate literate traditions one does not overlook the strengths that oral communication offers. So often, literary communication utilizes only one channel to disseminate information (the visual mode) while oral methods often lend themselves to multiple channels of engagement such the visual, audible, gestural, or spatial modes. This multimodal tendency of oral methodologies provides a greater likelihood of learners to experience truth in person.

Seng has already begun to point the way forward by reminding us that God himself uses both the spoken word and the written word to communicate. Instead of speaking of the transitional curriculum whereby the implication is the learners need to leave behind the oral/cyclical for the 'deeper' literate/linear methods, an alternative approach is needed. This begins by asking not what is lost through a certain method, but instead, what each method can offer and then how we can build an integrated curriculum around leveraging the strengths of both oral/cyclical and literate/linear learning paradigms.

Integration in an educational environment requires a fierce commitment to honor learners from both methodological traditions and a willingness to cultivate a holistic learning paradigm. Such a holistic (understood as integrated) learning experience ensures the learners are equipped not only for their own learning, but to train the next generation.

Billy Coppedge spent seven years with his wife, Joanna, and family living in northern Uganda, where they served as oral pastoral training consultants. He is currently pursuing further study related to orality and theology at the University of Edinburgh.

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Questions for Reflection

- 1. If oral tradition people or groups wish to learn or use literature, why should they be discouraged? Would it not be best for them to develop the use of literary skills in a friendly environment where they could ask the hard questions?*
- 2. In light of the mega-emphasis on Bible translation, should not the development of literacy and the linear method of learning be encouraged among tribal disciples?*
- 3. Can anyone limited to orality communication and cyclical learning understand and apply the teaching of the New Testament letters? Why or why not?*
- 4. Can a robust tribal theology (profound cultural application of scripture) develop without literary skills and linear thinking? Why or why not?*
- 5. Does an oral tradition and cyclical learning/teaching practitioner ever lose the ability to use those skills? If not, why the concern?*