

Missions, Orality, and the Bible

November 16, 2005 — Fresh Words Edition

By John Piper

Thoughts on Pre-, Less-, and Post-literate Cultures

There is significant discussion today about oral cultures and how they learn and how they should be evangelized and built up in faith. The discussion ranges from pre-literate to post-literate—from cultures that have never had their languages written down to Western groups that no longer read but only watch images and listen to iPods. Of course, awareness of orality is not new, since virtually all cultures before the modern period and its printing press learned orally. Everywhere the church has gone in the history of missions, its initial task has mainly been oral, even where missionaries prized literacy and sought to translate the Bible as part of their church planting.

What's new is 1) the development of more self-conscious strategies of adapting to the kinds of oral traditions in various cultures, and 2) the more rigorous application of the biblical history of redemption as oral story, and 3) the intention and attempt to develop means of communicating biblical truth to so-called post-literate Westerners who spend little time reading.

None of these developments is in itself bad and may be very good. 1) Orality will always be a huge and precious and inevitable part of human life, even in the most literate cultures, and it is wise to make the best use of this reality for Christ and his kingdom. 2) The Bible is history and interpretation—it is a story *along with* the inspired, authoritative explanation. It should be heralded in oral and written form for what it is. 3) Post-literate Westerners (and people who in every age have had difficulty with reading, or dislike for reading) should be both met where they are and encouraged and helped to advance in the benefits of Bible reading and meditation. So, it seems to me that these developments are expressions of love and common sense.

But I am not sure what convictions about the Bible lie beneath some of these developments. So I want to ask a few questions that I hope will help us make explicit the underlying assumptions about the function of the written word of God in these developments. My hope and expectation is that all who identify themselves as evangelicals will say a hearty No to question #1 below and a hearty Yes to the rest. Then let us do the mission with the wisest use of our voice and our Book.

1. Will we Westerners who have had the Bible in our languages for five centuries and who have access to Greek and Hebrew in which the Bible was verbally inspired keep this privileged position for ourselves?

2. Or will we humble ourselves and labor with all our might to help other peoples and cultures have the same access we have to a full and right understanding of the scriptures so that they do not have to depend on cultural outsiders telling them what God's words say and what they mean and how they should be applied culturally and religiously and missiologically?
3. Will we tell pre-literate and less-literate peoples and cultures that all authoritative religious truth comes from God through a single inspired book, and that all oral communication about God and his ways, no matter where it happens anywhere in the world, depends for its final reliability on this book, the Bible?
4. Will we clarify for them that, although all other holy books may have some helpful religious insights, nevertheless they do not have any final authority from God, but only the Bible does?
5. Will we tell them that this Bible was first written in Greek and Hebrew, the languages that God used when centuries ago "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21)?
6. Will we make sure they understand that if they remain only oral and do not someday raise up a generation who can read this book and study it in the original languages, they will remain dependent on outsiders for the divine truth God has given only through the Book?
7. Will we joyfully concur that access to the words of God in the Bible in one's own language is a blessing greater than health and life, and that the golden rule gives us the privilege and duty to give other people and peoples the blessing that has come to us without our deserving it or planning it?
8. Will we labor for the long-term strength of the church among all unreached and less-reached peoples, by empowering them with the ability to read and study the Bible in the original languages, in the *desire* that the Lord may come very soon, but in the sober *possibility* that he may delay his return for centuries?
9. Will we labor to reverse the Western cultural trend away from reading, in the conviction that, when one moves away from reading, one moves away from a precious, God-given, edifying, stabilizing connection with God's written word?

For the Word and for the Mission,
Pastor John