

THE LITERATE MIND-SET

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(The author carries the full responsibility for the views expressed.)

I am focusing only on effectively developing the communication of Jesus' message to oral learners by oral communicators. I make no suggestions about any theory of translation or any strategy for the development of printed products, or the development of audio or audio-video products that arise out of printed products, nor the development of literacy and literature.

Also, I am not suggesting that anyone abandon their literate-ness. I am recommending that they go beyond and relearn the mind-set of their youth.

Introduction

It has come to my mind recently the issue of "Key Biblical Terms". There is a deep-seated notion in religious circles that God's message is innately integrated into "words". The concept "key" communicates 'very important or extremely important'. "Biblical" communicates that the terms have their source in the Bible. "Terms" communicates the concept that 'meaning' is related to 'words and titles'.

Islamists long ago declared that the Quran was untranslatable. They declared that no one had the ability to express in another language the Arabic words, since God and the Prophet intended a special meaning. However, they also recognized that many people did not know Arabic but were wanting to know something of the meaning, so they allowed some people to make "commentaries" on the sacred texts.

So also, in many Christian circles, there is a deeply felt attitude that any translation of the Bible that does not resemble the Greek originals is merely a "commentary", though they might call it a "paraphrase".

With the onset of modern communication, many Christians have accepted the fact that God's message should be offered to believers and non-believers alike in meaningful ways. J. P. Philips probably broke the ice, but his translation was rather limited to a British audience. Ken Taylor's "Living Letters" opened the door for meaningful translation in America. He wanted to make the Scriptures effective in his children.

The mind-set

The need for grouping a list of "Key Biblical terms" is a part of human thinking that I call "the literate mind-set". People with the literate mind-set are always suspicious of meaningful translations. They are especially suspicious of oral translation. If they knew anything about the signing translations deaf people, they would be suspicious of them. The literate mind-set refuses validity to any other means of communication. The literate mind-set can recognize 'sacredness/holiness' only in original form. To them, "He has raised up a horn of salvation for us" has lost its holiness in "He is saving us".

Someone might ask, "How does the literate mind-set come about?" Apparently it is closely related to the way we humans develop. When our brains are developing, language-learning is very easy. Children seem to soak up vocabulary and grammar, even when the language of the breakfast table is different from the language of the street and different from the language of the classroom. They easily shift from one language to another in the different contexts. UP TO ABOUT

THE AGE OF 10-14. About that time, the language-learning part of the developing brain begins to change. Perhaps it becomes ‘hardwired’. By the time most people “mature”, learning another language is difficult—extremely difficult for some. Learning to read is learning a VISUAL language. Perhaps that is the basic reason why adult literacy programs have such minimal results.

Now, people with the literate mind-set are always suspicious of meaningful translations. They are especially suspicious of oral translation. If they knew anything about the translations of the teams whom you are consulting, they would be suspicious. The literate mind-set refuses validity to any other means of communication. The literate mind-set can recognize ‘sacredness/holiness’ only in original form. “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us” has lost its holiness in “He is saving us”.

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It seems that those who learn to read well become firmly ‘hardwired’; they become set in their minds. The meaning of concepts becomes focused in printed (or digital) words. Typically, people like to use the jargon of their circles. In that way, they maintain their identity to their fellows—using certain words, labels or titles. That habit, for the literate, carries over into their thinking about the Bible and church rituals. It seems that they attribute God’s holiness to the forms in the rituals and the forms of words. That mind-set causes some problems between generations in a given language. For example, many churches have gone “contemporary” either in a different service or in a different place. The older generation might tolerate such, but it is hard for them to not suspect or criticize.

The literate mind-set is demonstrated in those church services in which a leader tells the congregation to read aloud Scripture. He assumes that everyone reads well and learns from texts that they read. He does not recognize (or he ignores) that most people learn from what they hear and see. (I cringe when I hear the roar of a hundred voices reading aloud a Scripture passage. I think “What is the meaning?” when I hear even the catatonic sound of even eight voices ill-timed reading the Beatitudes.)

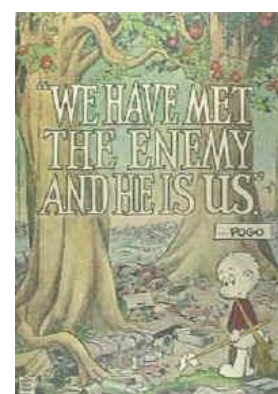
The literate mind-set is focused on form, particularly printed (or digital) words and phrases. Discussions about phrases, titles or labels might be legitimate within a given monolingual society. However, the literate mind-set strongly desires that phrases, titles and labels in their languages be carried uniformly over into other languages, even where it is detrimental to do so.

There is another factor about which the literate mind-set makes an unfortunate assumption—The perpetuation of the Scriptures in the community. The literate mind-set assumes that a printed translation will communicate for 30-50 years and that people will increasingly want to read it and other literature. Sadly, the reality is that children leaving school with some reading skills soon lose them through neglect. Sadly, in our modern world, any given language changes rapidly, resulting that a meaningful translation communicate only to one generation. We all ought to recognize that each new generation should have its translation (10-15 years) and that the translation work should be done by native speakers of the language. If we expect God’s message to be carried to the most people in each generation, we must facilitate the common people, even those we call “illiterate”.

Conclusion

It is extremely difficult to abandon the literate mind-set.

The first step is to recognize that it exists. A cartoon character surveyed a swamp littered with trash and said, “We have met the enemy...and he is us!” Thus, we must energize ourselves



to approach the whole paradigm of oral communication with a determination to change our mind-set.

A profile of us literate communicators

- As a person becomes more literate, he or she recognizes sounds as written words. They recognize them by their appearance. They can recognize different shades of meaning by the arrangement on a page.

They learn the difference of meaning when they see:

You are going to the fair!

You are going to the fair?

Are you going to the fair?

- We literates tend to forget that the markings on a page –words– can never replicate that word in its sounded form.
- We literates tend to become increasingly text oriented.
- For us literates, knowledge is defined in terms of what we can secure from files, books, computers, cell phones. We tend to relate knowledge to what we can remember.
- We highly literate people develop the need and the ability to reduce stories, texts and documents to a theme. We like slogans. We look for a “bottom line” statement. We want someone to tell the “gist” of the story. Some of us can only think with an outline, a list of principles or the steps in a process. We like our teachings in an expository form.
- We highly literate people constantly analyze other people’s behavior and the life situations of ourselves and others. We draw conclusions and lessons from events that happen.
- We highly literate people tend to compare and combine information to form new truths or slightly different teachings. We like to work with whole units.
- As people develop literate skills, they tend to shy away from memorization and may lose that skill due to the lack of use.
- We literates tend to turn inward. We prefer to read silently.
- We literates tend toward individualism, thus moving away from being able to relate well to others. We tend to demand our “own rights” as opposed to supporting the common good of the group.
- We literates tend to listen critically to someone communicating. Thus, we do not participate in a story as much as oral learners participate.
- Most literates feel a deep need to explain everything in great detail, comparing and analyzing all of the parts. They expect others to explain things in detail.
- Messages from literates are generally expository. As the person becomes more literate, the more he or she speaks in expository manners.
- We literates put high importance on time and the management of time. We value economy of time. Thus, we assume that everyone should be punctual to attend a called meeting. We assume that the duration of an event should be defined, that events should have terminations.

Our literate mind-set hinders us from understanding how to help oral communicators convince their people of truth

- We literates consider that the printed Scriptures are the only trustworthy source of spiritual truth for ourselves.

- We mistakenly assume that printed Scriptures are the only trustworthy source for oral learners;
- We also mistakenly assume that someone reading a printed translation is the only trustworthy audio communication of Scripture.
- Most literates even consider oral translations to be unworthy of trust.
- We literates put high importance on the form of words and phrases. Thus, we make mistaken assumptions.
 - We assume that the “correct” meaning can only be communicated in the proper form. We assume that abstract ideas should be translated as abstract into the receptor languages.
 - We suspect any new version, even in our own language. We echo the proverb: “The old is better than the new.” Even when we consult new versions, we do it to see how close it AGREES with our customary version. We like a new version only where it might explicate something that was ambiguous to us. We do not like it when a new version explicates a concept with which we have become comfortable. Some of us reject the explication, even though it communicates a better meaning.
 - We assume that the “correct” meaning can only be communicated in a form that closely resembles the original form. The Roman Catholic leaders are persistent in maintaining Latin labels. Many evangelical churches carry labels from their language into the names of their daughter churches in other languages. For example, some Conservative Baptist missionaries wanted that the churches in Chile to perpetuate their theological stance with the name “La Iglesia Conservadora Bautista”. Fortunately, the believers refused because ‘conservadora’ would imply that they were a canning factory).
- We literates put high importance on communicating all the details.
 - We assume that all the information in a document validates the historicity of the document, such time markers as, “In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was...” We consider those historical markers are indicators of truth.

Let’s think about how truth is validated. To us literates, a reference to something we already know or some document that we can read and verify implies that a statement is true/valid/representing reality. It is different for orally oriented people. They consider a message valid and acceptable because they recognize *the messenger as true*. They do not attribute validity to a message in and of itself.

Think about the example, “In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was...” To a reader, this clause implies that both Luke and Theophilus knew that there was such a king who lived not very long before they lived. Now think of a listener in a culture with no literature and very little contact with the outside world—a culture in which there are no schools where he might have been told that other cultures have histories. If he hears about Herod, that he was a king, he will puzzle over the strange name and the unknown political title and then he will puzzle over how that unknown man relates to the story of Zecharias and the angel telling him that he will have a son. While he is puzzling over those ideas, he misses a lot of the message that we would like him to understand. For such a listener, such information is “clutter” to listeners. It is like static on a shortwave radio or telephone connected to a deteriorated cable.

Historical information is useful only to those who have an inventory of information to which they can relate new information. Luke’s introductory clause was very valid and useful to Theophilus and to the first century Christians. At the time Luke’s document was bound to the other documents to form the New Testament, Luke’s introductory clause lost most of its

value for validating truth, even for readers. When we fast forward to today's readers in America or Britain, not many readers relate Luke's clause to validity.

- We assume that the Hebraic names written in the text should be transliterated and maintained in an oral translation, even though the direct transliteration presents very foreign names, thus distracting the listener from the message.

We want that an oral translation must transliterate each name, even when Cephas is called Peter in another document, or Saul is called Paul in the same document.

We want that the listeners should hear the transliterated names of non-participants to the narratives.

- We assume that it is important to make explicit the transliterated names of the political labels, like the difference labels of rulers and of territories. Yes, those labels were important in the first centuries. Like the references to historical events in the document, the specific political labels are irrelevant to readers and listeners today.
- We literates tend to communicate among ourselves with expository forms (explaining in detail).
 - We mistakenly assume that such communications are helpful to oral learners.
 - We mistakenly assume that information is the important thing. For us, truth is communicated by facts. For us, knowledge is the accumulation of facts.
 - We mistakenly assume that lists, steps in processes and principles are the best way to present truth.
 - We often mistakenly assume that our listeners are as literate as we are. Thus we tend to cram a great deal of information into the communication time-span or situation.
 - We mistakenly assume that our listeners can understand the information in flashbacks and mentally relate such information to the story line.
- We literates tend to consider that we are qualified to determine what is good for other peoples—that “We know best”.
- We literates tend to consider that “one size fits all”. When we have success with a product, we assume that the product is perfect for all other situations. (For example: the Gideons distribute the King James Bibles and New Testaments in hotels around the world and among the Armed Forces. The JESUS Film Project assumes that the original film is appropriate for audiences in the non-literate and non-western world.
- Very few of us literates recognize that oral learners learn and make decisions about their lives through personal experiences/events. Failing that, we tend to mis-train communicators for presenting the message to oral learners.
 - We fail to recognize that oral learners make commitments because they “feel truth”, more than they make decide by thinking about the advantages or disadvantages. Thus, we are likely to train an oral communicator to motivate oral learners by cognitive presentations.
 - We fail to recognize that the oral learners learn best by “doing” rather than listening. Thus, in our training oral communicators to use logical arguments, they are ineffective when they replicate their training.
 - We fail to recognize that oral learners learn through participating in an event, rather than observing an event. Thus, we should train oral communicators to encourage participation.
 - We fail to recognize that oral communicators have difficulty replicating behavior that someone teaches, but they can replicate modeled behavior.

How you can gain a perspective beyond your literate mind-set

In the process of resolving a problem, it is well proven that a change of perspective helps. I suggest that the difficulties of communicating God's message to 1900+ languages are a problem that Christians should resolve.

If you do not perceive that such an uncompleted task is a problem, you would do well to read on further. Delete this message.

Step 1

Since you are continuing to read, perhaps you are ready to recognize that YOU HAVE A MIND-SET about the communication of God's message. It is a *literate mind-set*. Such a mind-set is not a bad thing! It is a good thing, beneficial to each of us.

Step 2

However, it seems that the literate mind-set has hindered the Christian church for centuries in evangelizing and discipling new peoples. The literate mind-set expects other peoples to become like us in order to join us. If you want to reduce that hindrance in your ministry, to have a part in overcoming that problem of communicating to oral audiences, YOU MUST CHANGE YOUR MIND-SET TO ONE THAT IS BEYOND THE LITERATE. You must DECIDE to change your perspective. ("A man persuaded against his will is of the same opinion still.")

Step 3

You must recognize that ORAL LEARNERS DO NOT LEARN IN THE SAME WAY THAT YOU LEARN.

Even though many people accept that evangelism can be oral, but they suspect that oral discipling is not likely to accomplish a viable, self-sustaining church group. However, it has been proven that it is not only viable but it is far more reproducible, even to second and third generations of churches.¹

Any truly effective style of communication must be reproducible by others of the language community. (The history of Christianity has been in spurts. The spurts happened when some group began a new ways for communicating of the truth that were previously hindered by elite literate groups. The energy of those spurts came from the fact that the followers were able to replicate what the leaders taught.)

A young pastor in Nigeria² was frustrated by his people's lack of response. He supposed that they were not intelligent. In a workshop, he learned to tell Bible stories and lead discussions. When he began teaching with this method, the people responded and demonstrated that they were very insightful. He realized that his literate teaching methods were the problem, not the people.

A church planting movement in South Asia grew with a focused oral approach. At the time of reporting, the group was growing at the rate of a new church each day. Even the pastors were trained orally. An independent evaluation of their skills and theology revealed that they maintain essentially correct doctrine. A comparable survey, in the same language group, demonstrated that many of pastors who had been trained by literate methodology were exhibiting syncretized doctrinal positions.³

¹ See "Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) No. 54, "Making Disciples of Oral Learners", Issues Group No. 25, page 40.

² See "Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) No. 54, "Making Disciples of Oral Learners", Issues Group No. 25, page 42-44.

³ See "Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) No. 54, "Making Disciples of Oral Learners", Issues Group No. 25, page 44-45.

Step 4

YOUR LITERATE BRAIN FUNCTIONS IN A VERY DIFFERENT WAY than the brain of an orally-oriented learner. In fact, the two ways are nearly incompatible.

As literate communicators, we have some mistaken assumptions about how oral learners learn. Now you must doubt the validity of those assumptions and be accepting that there are other ways. You must abandon offering them *our* styles of learning and communication.

We literates once were oral learners, but when we learned to read and absorbed the literate sub-culture, our whole perception of our world was deeply “rewired”. This is not wrong and no one should think that it was a mistake or that it should not have happened. However, we must recognize that we are now different. If we recognize that we are different, we can then purposely relearn how to communicate orally the Gospel message. That is the only way in which we can offer anything that oral communicators/learners can learn and REPRODUCE for their people. We must recognize that our communications will be reproducible in direct proportion to how those messages utilize the communication styles of the people. We must accept that oral learners learn primarily through narrative-story formats.

Step 5

You must accept the fact that ORALLY-ORIENTED PEOPLE COMMUNICATE TO ORAL LEARNERS VERY DIFFERENTLY from your styles of communicating and learning.

- They have an innate ability to retain content when it is presented in their way of learning.
- They need repetition—repetition that is presented in their natural modes of learning.

You must accept the fact that oral learners accept “truth” as it is validated to them by humans whom they accept as credible. Their acceptance of new concepts is in direct proportion to the closeness of that human to them personally. Thus, the most effective communication is accomplished:

- by a native speaker of the language of the audience;
- by that person being dressed in appropriate clothing (if visible);
- by speaking in the natural idioms of the language;
- by speaking in a natural communication mode (most likely storying in some form);
- by that person having earned credibility, perhaps by presenting first new ideas that meet the daily needs of the audience;
- by the message being uncluttered by information that once validated a document but is irrelevant to the message today.

History of Christianity

Jesus chose to teach via parables. He chose that style because it was the learning pattern of people. Paul’s teaching style was very oral. He constantly reminded the people of the Old Testament stories. Those stories validated God’s revelation. Later Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, from N.T. times to the Reformation, was communicated almost entirely orally. There came a dramatic change with the printing of the Gutenberg Bible and the proliferation of printed materials.

Since the Reformation, Christians have increasingly felt compelled to communicate in literate forms. By the 1900s, many churches and many missions were so fixated on literacy that believers were required to learn to read before being baptized.

Evangelical Christianity has developed expository preaching as the norm for communicating the truth. It then required that pastors/leaders be literate, in spite of the fact that today 50-85% of the world’s people are exclusively oral learners, semi-literates, functional illiterates or illiterates.

Consequently, to the degree that people are illiterate, they do not understand Christian teaching. They are not changed by the message. They cannot reproduce that message to their people.

Mission agencies continue to disregard the fact that oral learners do not understand messages in expository style. Nor can the listeners remember the teaching and thus, they certainly cannot reproduce it to others.

The primary problem is that only a few of us literates understand the differences between ourselves and illiterates. We do not comprehend how to effectively facilitate oral communicators in their teaching God's message to their own people.

A profile of oral learners

There are certain characteristics that we should recognize about all people, including ourselves before we became literate:

- Oral learners are highly relational people, comfortable in face-to-face interactions,
- They make decisions and communicate mostly in the concrete, rather than abstract notions. They learn best in sequential presentations of events, rather than random reports. They learn best when ideas are related to their lives.
- They trust persons, rather than written documents. They believe a person's message, rather than abstract truths.
- They *do not perceive* a word as a unit. To them, words are strictly sounds. They are ONLY sounds. There is nothing visual about words.
- Isolated sounds (words) have no meaning until someone uses them in a sentence or in bursts of sentences, usually associated with a life event or a story of a life event.
- Oral learners KNOW only what they can remember at a moment of need.
- Oral learners carry their "information (what they know)," with them everywhere. It is registered in stories, or mental pictures of life events.
- Oral learners do not condense stories. They feel no need for making lists or grouping information into outlines, lists of concepts or principles or teachings. They do not define steps in a process. They do not use any other expository type formats. Such formats are unnatural to their learning style. Oral learners cannot remember the content that is presented in such formats. Thus, those "methods" have little effect on oral learners and they are useless to oral communicators as they attempt to teach their people.
- They learn best through apprenticeships and mentoring. They can easily adopt behavior that someone models for them. They have difficulty learning to do things by being told how to do it.
- They seldom think about a truth or a teaching separately from their stories. They perceive that truths are unified with the story.
- Progress or success for an oral learner is his/her being aware of one's heritage and being true to it, and doing acceptable things in acceptable ways.
- Oral learners are very conservative. They are fearful of change.
- Oral learners are excellent "memorizers." They can remember long stories. They generally do not tinker or change their treasured ones.
- Oral learners use redundancy and often repetition.

- For an oral learner, to change a valued, historic, “text” is to threaten the community. He evaluates someone who changes an historic text to be a threat to his heritage. It is like plastering up a door in a house. To him, it is cutting off a treasured link to the past.
- Oral learners, when listening to a story, participate with the story teller in the “telling” of the story.
- Yet, oral learners can handle any thought, idea, concept, principle or teaching that a literate can handle, if it is properly clothed within a story.

Conclusion

I am not suggesting that anyone reject his or her literate-ness. I am suggesting something to those who wish to help others present God’s message to the remaining languages. I am recommending, that they move themselves beyond their literate mind-set to think and act in oral styles, first in their own languages and then in any language in which they are facilitating national teams. The people in whom we facilitate learning will learn best by imitating us.