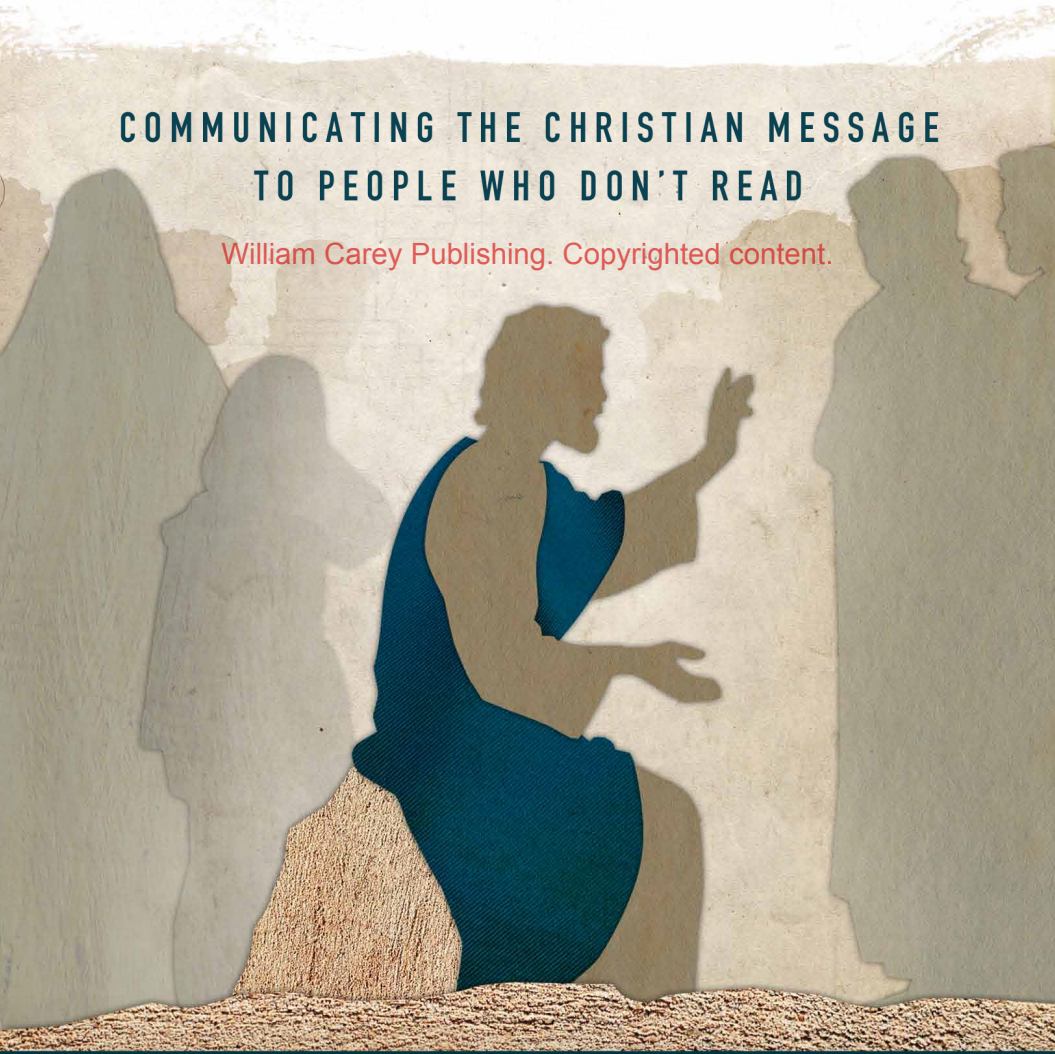
DON'T THROW THE BOOK AT THEM

COMMUNICATING THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE TO PEOPLE WHO DON'T READ

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HARRY BOX

FOREWORD BY CHARLES H. KRAFT

Don't Throw the Book at Them: Communicating the Christian Message to People Who Don't Read
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UNDERSTANDING ORAL COMMUNICATORS

Making a clear definition of who exactly are the oral communicators of the world is not a straightforward matter. We may sometimes refer to them as illiterates, preliterates, or nonreaders, but these are negative ideas, and unfortunately this is the way Western, literacy-oriented society usually regards them. A more positive way to view them is to say that they are oral people who respond primarily to oral messages and to the people and events within their society.

We can also consider as oral communicators those people who are part of a literate society and are themselves functionally literate, but who for most situations do not choose to use their literacy skills. These people have been described simply as "non-book" people, and will be discussed in more detail in later chapters. Though I will be referring primarily to people who are functionally nonliterate, I feel it is important for us to realize that there is a significant group of people who are part of Western literate society but who can still be regarded as oral communicators.

In general, the statistics relating to literacy are not clearly defined, as the standards used for classifying people as literate vary considerably. Statistics from organisations such as the World Health Organisation and UNESCO tend to be very much on the high side. "Developing" countries in particular are under pressure to demonstrate that literacy is increasing within their borders. However, adult literacy programs within these countries may only

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require that people attain a level of literacy whereby they can read a few simple words and sentences.

In "developed" countries also, statistics are not always what they seem to be. These countries would not want it widely known if literacy rates were lower than expected or else declining. In the United States and Australia, for example, official figures would indicate that 99 percent of their populations are literate. However, both these countries acknowledge that at least 10 percent of their people are nonliterate, and they have special programs to encourage these people to become literate.

But when we are thinking about communicating the gospel message to people, we also need to realize we are looking for more than just basic literacy skills. Although the Bible does contain some simple material, much of it requires an advanced level of reading. Many people could be regarded as functionally literate and still have great difficulty in reading their Bible with comprehension. For these people, it is the oral presentation of the Christian message that will be relevant and meaningful, and "throwing the book at them" will not have much significance at all.

Putting it all together, if we consider those people who belong to predominantly oral societies as well as the "non-book" people of literate societies, we are probably looking at something like 70 percent of the world's present population. This is an enormous number of people who are best described as oral communicators.[1]

It is also important for us to understand that this group of people includes a high percentage of the non-Christian people of the world and also a high percentage of the unevangelized people of the world. In the light of these facts, if we are at all interested in having an effective ministry of communicating the Christian message to these people, then understanding oral communicators, their characteristics, and their methods of communication demands our serious consideration.

1 Klem (1982, 8–25) gives a very comprehensive treatment of the matter of how to assess people as "literate"—and what that means. He also discusses the criteria for "functional literacy" and how this is determined. His conclusion is that the vast majority of the world's people are oral communicators. These comments were made some years ago, but I believe Klem's premises are still very relevant.

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SOME THINGS WE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ORAL COMMUNICATION

The following aspects of oral communication are important for us to understand as a basic approach to this topic.

It is a worldwide system. In many parts of the world today there is a strong oral system of communication. For the majority of the world's people this is the traditional system of communication that people have used for many hundreds of years. This oral system is not just something superficial, only for passing simple messages; rather it is a complex system requiring many skills. This system is able to communicate at all levels of the society and to all situations. It is at the heart of all experiences (see Klem 1982, xix).

It is a traditional method of celebration. In this case drama and dance are often used alongside singing and chanting, along with drums, didgeridoo, rhythm sticks, and many other forms of musical accompaniment. Oral communities usually have many reasons for celebration, and so this type of communication forms an important part of their life experience (see ibid., 126–38; Finnegan 1970; Nicholls 1983, 1–12).

It is a traditional method of teaching. For many societies, oral communication is used to give all instruction about religious beliefs, kinship systems, social structure, and the obligations required by the community. Cultural values and moral code, and practical things like hunting, fishing, and house building, are also taught this way. This oral instruction is usually accompanied by personal example and modelling. Klem gives many examples of this (see 1982, 97–109).

There is a wide diversity of oral communication. There are many different ways of using the oral communication system. These include many types of storytelling, drama, poetry, singing, and music. Some of these oral media are unique to a particular group; others are shared by many groups. Oral people are not limited in their oral skills or in the sort of communication that they can produce.

As we examine the evidence of the oral media that are used today, we find that there is incredible variety and creativity. The following are some writers who give an extensive range of examples of oral communication techniques:

- Denoon and Lacey 1981: Poetic mnemonic devices, navigation, stories, paintings, buildings, tombs, dance, music, and ritual
- Farrall 1984: Navigation in Micronesia

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- Finnegan 1970: Poems, stories, songs, connected with divination boards. Praise songs, proverbs, riddles
- Horton 1967: Epic songs, love poetry, magical rites
- Klem 1982: Songs, hymns, stories, riddles, jokes, chants, dances, proverbs, poems
- Nicholls 1983: Poetry, storytelling, proverbs, songs, drama, dance, puppetry
- Pearson 1977: Storytelling with sandgraphs

Oral communication requires live performers and audience response. The oral system of communication is different from the written system in that the oral system requires a live performer or performers who can use all kinds of facial expressions, gestures, and sounds, and may also have musical background. In many cases the person who is skilled in oral communication has an important position in society.

Oral communication also requires an audience and, in most cases, active participation by the audience. The performer of a story or poem or song looks to the audience for an appropriate response—to participate in a chorus line, or in some other way to become involved in the whole presentation (see Dorson 1972, 41; Klem 1982, 107–8).

What we have considered above is really just a brief look at some of the aspects of oral communication. These form an introduction to the more detailed study below of the prominent characteristics of oral communicators. The purpose of this is that we might grasp the significance of these facts: that oral communication is widespread, involving billions of people; that it totally permeates the lifestyle and communication experience of those people; and that in many cases it is very different from everything related to literacy-oriented experience.

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF ORAL COMMUNICATORS

In considering the characteristic features of oral communicators, we are not simply considering the features of a particular culture, but rather some particular features that are common to many cultures. These features relate directly to communication and are particularly significant in the area of cross-cultural communication.

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Group Orientation

This is perhaps the most obvious of all the characteristics of oral communicators, as the very nature of oral communication demands the presence of more than one person to participate, and in many cases a group of people. But the fact that it is obvious does not mean that people always understand the significance of this characteristic. Group orientation is the basis for all the other characteristics that we will consider, and to understand this characteristic fully means that we have a good grasp on understanding oral communicators as a whole and how we can communicate effectively with them. As Ong writes, "Oral communication unites people in groups. Writing and reading are solitary activities" (1982, 69). This is easily observed in contact with either a literacy-oriented or oral communication group.

Group orientation affects every part of oral people's lives. It determines cultural values as well as the social, political, educational, spiritual, and economic activities of each person in the community. In all of these things the group is in focus, not the individual. Also, and very significantly in respect to Christian communication, it affects decision-making processes. Group decisions are usually regarded as more important and more binding on the individual than personal decisions (see ch. 9). As we examine further the characteristics of oral people, we will see just how thoroughly this primary characteristic of group orientation permeates each one.

An important feature of this characteristic is the very strong, and in many cases complete, contrast to the individualism that is characteristic of literacy-oriented people. This contrast is often recognized by literacy-oriented people, but in most cases the serious significance of it is not realized. This is especially important with regard to communication of the Christian message. For Christian communicators who are literacy-oriented people, a proper understanding of this group orientation characteristic is essential if they hope to achieve effective communication to oral people. The following characteristics are closely related to this one and merit our close attention.

Event-oriented Rather than Time-oriented

Probably one of the first things that is noticed by someone from a Western, time-oriented culture when visiting an oral, event-oriented culture is the marked difference in the perspective on time. In some cases it may help the

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