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When I Write, I Feel the Pleasure of God: The Life and Work of Scott Moreau



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INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT MOREAU BY ANTHONY CASEY

Scott Moreau (DMiss, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) missionary to Africa for fourteen years and more than thirty years serving as faculty at Wheaton College.

Scott Moreau is the inaugural recipient of the Evangelical Missiological Society Lifetime Achievement Award.

This award is voted by a jury of leaders and peers in missiology and seeks to honor those who have faithfully labored for the cause of the Great Commission and made significant contributions to the field. This life history interview is a reprint of the original Fall 2020 publication and is a fitting way to once again honor Scott Moreau, a generational leader in EMS and beyond.

Scott Moreau (DMiss, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) served in Africa for 14 years before joining the faculty of Wheaton College, where he has served as Professor of Intercultural Studies for 30 years and most recently as Dean of the Graduate School. Scott is a longtime board member with the Evangelical Missiological Society.

This interview is part of a series showcasing and celebrating the life and work of veteran missiologists. The intent is to get to know the people behind the ideas, shedding light on their early years, calling, development, and contribution to the field of missiology. This interview has been lightly edited for length and flow. The interview was conducted by Anthony Casey.

Anthony: *Scott, tell us a little bit about when and where you were born.*

Scott: 1955 in Butler, PA. Growing up, we moved eight times before I was 13 years old and those were all interstate moves. I got used to the idea that I'm not going to stay in one place very long and that that was part of the pattern. We moved every time my dad got a promotion or a transfer. Geographically, from Chicago in the North to Harlingen, TX in the South and from LA in the West to Atlanta, GA in the East. Pretty much all over the map.

A: *Was there one place you stayed during your formative years or was it really just place to place every few years?*

S: Golly, everything was so short, but by the time we moved to the Chicago area that was 7th grade for me. That time was pretty formative and the longest chunk.

A: *Can you tell us a little about your parents? What were they like? What kind of personalities did they have? What did they do?*

S: My dad was a salesman for a petrochemical company. Easy to get along with and outgoing, but absent a lot and that certainly played a role. When we were at home, it was mom who ruled the roost and that was just the reality growing up. Mom and I had similar personalities and that resulted in some tensions and challenges. I was number three out of four. The black sheep of the family was number one, so he kind of sheltered the rest of us from frustrations or normal childhood pranks and punishments and things like this. But I would say I have a pattern with my mom that plays significantly in my scholarship. I grew up with the impression I could never be good enough to please her so I developed this pattern of trying to please my mom. It plays into people pleasing some, but it's really person focused and the focus is my mom. I always wanted her to be proud of me. It's funny, even as an adult that plays a role, and my wife Emily would get angry at me occasionally when I was acting out of the norm for her because I was trying to impress my mom talking about things I was doing and so on.

Now neither of my parents were believers, so faith didn't have much of an impact on them. As a matter of fact, my mom was not excited when I chose to follow the Lord's leading and become a missionary because she wanted me to be a scientist. She actually wrote me a very long letter when I was in college and beginning the process of transferring to Wheaton. She noted that from very early I was gifted in mathematics and science so she wanted me to at least double major. If I was going to major in Christianity in some way, shape, or form, she still wanted me to major in math or physics and I wound up being a physics major. I thought that was good advice, but still with this sense of 'OK, I'm going a direction that's not pleasing to her. What does that mean?' I didn't change that path because the Lord had a bigger pull on my life, I'm grateful to say.

But this idea of pleasing her still shows up in a lot of ways even today. Now, when I'm writing, is it good enough for her? A little anecdote that captures this: I wrote a book on spiritual warfare and found out that my mom was reading it and the only

feedback I ever got was that she told my dad who told my wife who told me there was a typo on page 72. As you can see, trying to please her became an impossible task. So there's a dance she and I have gone through over the years and I've stopped playing my part in the dance more recently. I'm not looking for her approval anymore because I know it's not gonna come, not the way I want it to. If it did come, it would scare me. I think that there's a psychology behind that, and I'm not even completely sure what it is, but it's the reality that I have to deal with in my own life.

A: *So, in college, you majored in physics? Did you enjoy math and science growing up? What were you planning to do?*

S: I loved math and science! Actually, I started at the University of Illinois in their aeronautical engineering program. I looked at the job market and thought electrical engineering would be better, so I switched focus. The saddest part of leaving U of I was leaving the engineering program. Wheaton, of course, is a liberal arts college and the University of Illinois is a public university where in engineering school, I had 18 hours of Social Sciences, English, etc., and got that out of the way. I was looking forward to nothing but engineering courses. When I transferred to Wheaton, I had a boatload of things I had to catch up on.

I knew I had been called to ministry; that's why I was at Wheaton. But I still wasn't quite ready to give up science. I still today have a small section of my bookshelves where I have my physics books. I still enjoy it.

My junior year at Wheaton, I had to take a career attitude test to see what career might be a best fit. I knew I had been called into ministry – not missions yet. So it gave my supposed career choices. Number one was computer programmer. Number 50 was pastor. What do I do with this? I just said OK this is the Lord's call but maybe I shouldn't be a pastor. I can preach and I can teach but shepherding is not where my strengths lie. And caring for people as opposed to caring for ideas is not where my strengths lie either. You know, I've got friends and so on. It's not that I don't care about people, but shepherding people – that's not who I am and that's fine. I'm glad I know that as a 65 year old!

A: *So you had this ministry calling in college. How did you become a Christian?*

S: I became a Christian my senior year in high school through the ministry of Young Life. I had a bunch of my close friends who were coming to Christ and I resisted. That was from sophomore year on. They got involved with Young Life and I stayed

away from it for a while. Then I went to a summer camp in between junior and senior year. It was there I realized I wanted to receive Christ, but I didn't want to do it at camp because it was too emotional and everybody was doing it and I thought, if I go home and come to Christ in a few months, then I know it's something that's going to stick. That was the logic part of my brain that was working in that direction, and that's what I did. It was around Christmas and I asked Christ in my life. It was probably two or three nights in a row because I didn't feel anything. Then I started getting involved more with Young Life.

A: *I saw you were on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ for a time. Were you exposed to them in college?*

S: I came across a Navigators Bible study at the University of Illinois and joined. I was involved with Navigators my freshman year. Sophomore year when I went back, I realized Navigators was not the only ministry on campus, so I tried out Navigators, Cru, and InterVarsity for a semester. It made for a busy life, but I loved it. I was growing and eventually, I saw that Cru seemed to have the best mix of discipleship and social activities. I wasn't that excited about the evangelism part. I was still reasonably new in my faith and I knew there was a commitment to sharing my faith. I don't have the gift of evangelism, but that doesn't excuse me from being able to bear witness for Christ.

Then, when I transferred to Wheaton, I started working with a Cru staff member and then my senior year I was leading the ministry on Wheaton's campus. We would go to a junior college and share Christ in the cafeteria and things like this.

As far as a calling to ministry, I was in a prayer meeting at the University of Illinois and it was as if God said to me, "What are you going to do with your engineering degree?" I had felt called to ministry, so I thought, well, nothing. God said, "It's time to move on" and that started the process of transferring to Wheaton. I figured I'd get better ministry training there, though I still double-majored in physics.

So I was involved with Cru and decided to join staff. I got to blend the two things I love. I was going with Cru on an experimental assignment to teach physics and general science in a southern African school – 10th and 12th graders in Swaziland. I ended up staying with Cru for 14 years. When I was 22 years old and new to staff, I thought if I stayed long enough, evangelism will become a natural reflex and I won't have to force myself. After 14 years, it still hadn't happened. My wife and I

realized it was never going to be a natural reflex, so when God called us back to the U.S. with our young family, it didn't happen through a dream or vision. It was just a realization that she was ready to go back. It took me another 18 months to become ready.

It was good for us to be with Cru in Africa, but neither of us were ready for a campus ministry assignment in the U.S. I was already teaching at a Cru-based seminary in Nairobi so I thought maybe I could find a place to teach in the U.S. That started the search that led me here to Wheaton as a professor.

A: *Interesting. So, backing up a bit, how and why Africa?*

S: Ah, my senior year of college I'm thinking about this call to ministry. I thought, ok, I could be a pastor, work with Young Life or Cru, or be a missionary. Those are the options. Wheaton is a place where you hear about missions a lot. In chapel I heard about an opportunity to teach math and science in Nigeria and that piqued my interest. At an interest meeting, I met an anthropologist who came alongside me and helped me weekly think through culture. It was an incredible one on one time. He had been a missionary as well, but he was an anthropologist by training, so he blended the best of both worlds and I realized I wanted to go. In my mind, I wanted to go to Nigeria and teach science and math. When I joined staff with Cru, one of the early interview questions was "Are you willing to go anywhere that we send you?" and I kind of gulped and said yes and they said, "but what are your plans?" Well my plans are I sense God's call to go to Nigeria. When they assigned us, I didn't get Nigeria, but it was still Africa.

I was content with that and we went over as part of a large team. Cru was experimenting with vocational missions, so nurses, doctors, and teachers were on our team. There were 70 of us on staff with Cru in Swaziland. It was kind of the incubator for Cru to think things through. Eventually they decided the vocational thing didn't work as well because it got in the way of people being able to be engaged in ministry full time and the people it produced didn't have all the deepest embedded Cru values. And that would be characteristic of my experience as well.

I still love the ministry and applaud what they do and how they go about doing it. There are things I would critique, but I would critique things of myself as well. They were a great 14 years. It's just unimaginable to me that this is my 30th year at Wheaton. So, now I've been here twice as long as I was on staff with Cru.

A: *So you were already in Africa with Cru. I know you do some continuing biblical studies as part of their training. Was it through that that you started as a student at TEDS? Explain that process.*

S: Yes, I went to Swaziland first and wasn't sure what my next step was after my two-year term. I went to one of those Cru continuing studies classes taught by a professor who was the founding president of a seminary Cru was establishing in Africa. He was telling us about the seminary. All my light bulbs went off. I thought, I could train African pastors using my teaching gift because I had realized in my second year of teaching physics that high school level physics is uninteresting and unchallenging, and it's boring for me. My personality is such that if I am bored, I become boring myself and I thought continuing teaching physics isn't the best route for me.

So, when this thing came up with the seminary, I thought this could be where God has me next. So I applied to TEDS to start the M.Div. I thought it was a good seminary where I could get a good education and then come back to Africa. I had no idea what I wanted to study outside of the core Bible and theology classes. I'm not the greatest language student. With theology, I think myself into circles. Funny story – I took a theology midterm and had a 104 degree fever. I stayed in my winter coat the whole time and just answered questions in a haze on the fly. I got the highest grade out of 100 students. But when I have time to sit there and think about things, I change my mind five times. I became an average theology student. But the missions classes were interesting. I didn't have the greatest teachers, well, one was very good, but the rest.... But I had been living in another culture for over two years. I'm changed. And this missions stuff absolutely fascinated me.

I ended up taking enough missions courses to have a missions emphasis with my MDiv. TEDS was just starting their DMiss program when I was there. I decided to enroll. I was in their second or third cohort ever. So I did the DMiss at TEDS and then went back to Africa and started teaching at the seminary. It was there I met my wife. We married after a year and had three of our four children there.

A: *Would you like to say anything about any of your professors at TEDS that were particularly influential?*

S: Well, I was a TA for the department and actually worked for Hesselgrave and Tim Warner. John Nyquist was there. Probably the most influential on me was Bill Taylor. He was there at Trinity at the time for a short stint. He was the best teacher

of the group. Warner was kind of dragged into the spiritual warfare movement at the time, so I was watching him as an outsider and kind of wishing he would drag me along with him, you know, and just see what this stuff is all about. I was interested but didn't know what to do with it.

At the time, at least, Hesselgrave was a scholar that had his feet in the regular academic world as well as in the Christian academic world. He had a foundation that I really admired and appreciated. I was a research assistant for some of his book writing, so I got to know some of his works from the research vantage point and really appreciated it. You know, his book on cross-cultural counseling was probably 10 years ahead of the game. I don't think it ever sold very well; it just wasn't very popular and it wasn't because it wasn't good, but it was written by a strange person, a missiologist who doesn't have his feet in the counseling world. Well, he's got anthropological training, so he should be able to talk about that. But at the same time, the field wasn't ready for it then.

A: *What was your DMiss project at TEDS?*

S: I developed a mission curriculum for the Nairobi International School of Theology. So it's a project that will never see the light of day. I surveyed East Africa focused on the curriculum. I had the Cru ethos that I had to fit, but I had the African context that I also had to fit. I understood the Cru ethos, but I didn't understand the African context so that's what I spent a lot of my work, my research, my thinking on. I looked at East African Church History. East African history. Not as much missionary history, but that played a role because it was a Christian institution. How does all this form a framework for thinking through a curriculum for missions in Kenya? What do Kenyans think about missions? That was early on so they weren't quite there yet. They have really come there now, but they weren't quite there yet. And that's what I lay at the feet of the missionaries. We didn't think about raising people up to become missionaries early enough. When I say we, I mean the whole missions community.

A: *Alright, today you're at Wheaton. What was that transition like? Did you think you'd be there long term since you had a pattern of moving so much?*

S: I really didn't think I'd be here this long. My wife was an army brat, so she and I both had moved around a lot. Growing up, she had lived internationally. If you had told me I was going to spend the next 30 years at Wheaton, I'm not sure what I would have done! My first few years here my DMiss was kind of denigrated like it

was a second-class doctoral degree, and then it was a seminary degree, so it was almost third class. It was better than a DMin, but not much, and so my need to prove myself to my mom spread out at Wheaton and I had to prove myself to my colleagues. Not as much in the missions department as the colleagues across campus. Do I have what it takes to teach at Wheaton?

I looked into doing a PhD. I went down and talked to some people at the University of Chicago. I went up to Trinity because they had invited a few people who had done DMiss degrees to do the PhD. But by the time that became a possibility, I had received tenure at Wheaton and I thought, OK, I don't have to have a PhD to be able to stay here. But early on, I had a lot of – and I found I'm not unique to this – a lot of “am I cut out to be here? Can people see through me?” You know what I mean? I got past that eventually.

I think it took becoming a full professor to move to that stage where I thought, OK, I've been accepted. All I can do from here is die or retire at Wheaton. And so I thought, OK, not sit back and relax, but I don't have to prove myself anymore. That's been a freeing thing, though I can still turn back toward that old path a little bit too easily. So, to answer your question, coming to Wheaton as a professor was a part of a three-year culture shock returning to the U.S. from Africa.

Frankly, when I was here as an undergrad, I did not like Wheaton. There was a snootiness to the place. The mature Christians were already locked into their friendship circles when I transferred in as a junior. What was left were the people who struggled. The people who were bitter. The people who were angry. Here I was, a gymnast and a physicist – two strikes against me. I didn't fit into the normal frame of relationships, at least from my perspective. I was unsuccessful in crossing the gender lines and having healthy relationships. I think that tied into my thinking about my mom. I was always expecting to be rejected so it made it easy for me, when I thought there was a hint of that, to just run away.

My roommate ended up committing suicide three years after graduation. Another person said Christianity was just a phase he went through. Another person - as soon as he left Wheaton - disavowed himself of being an Evangelical. These are the people that I spent a significant amount of time with. And you know, one told me I was too smart to go on staff with Cru. What in the world does that even mean? You know, it just didn't make any sense to me at that point in time. I thought, well, he's trying to help me. But you know, until God calls for an intervention, I'm still moving in this direction.

So I came on as faculty with that kind of background at Wheaton. But Jim Plueddemann, who was here as a faculty member, wonderfully helped me. I had to reintroduce myself to Wheaton and Wheaton had to reintroduce itself to me. I thought, I'm teaching in the Graduate School, I'm not an undergrad. I'm not an 18 year old. I'm not working with 18 year olds. I don't have to motivate graduate students and I'm on the teaching side of the line and it is a different atmosphere. So I've grown to love and appreciate Wheaton, but it took a while.

A: *Let's transition and talk about your writing. You've written a lot. Do you or did you write because you wanted to or because you had to? Did you write to get tenure, or because you had these ideas burning inside that you had to give expression?*

S: Well, I started writing when I was in Africa and there was no tenure. I had a half dozen articles in the *East African Journal of Theology*. I did a series on cults and an article on John Mbiti's view of time. So I'd say it's fair to say there's an element in which writing is in my blood. You know, I've said this before: Eric Liddle said, "God made me fast and when I run I feel his pleasure." Well God made me to write and edit and when I write and edit, I feel His pleasure. I think that's a fair statement to say, but at the same time I can't overlook the fact, "Hey Mom, look what I did." That thinking played more a role when I first came to Wheaton.

I started writing because I wanted to help the African church. That was what was driving it and you know, there's the idea of getting something in print is kind of cool, but I was a tiny fish in a very small pond.

It's funny how serendipity plays a role. I was new at Wheaton and Walter Elwell's office was down the hall. He's an interesting character. He has a photographic memory. I think he had written or edited 25 dictionaries related to theology and so on. He had a New Testament introduction. Anyway, he came down and stuck his head in my office and said, "Is there anyone in this department who's willing to help edit a book on 20th Century global Christianity? The main editor, JD Douglas needs help with the non-Western peoples." I said oh yeah, I'd love to do that and it was just virtue of serendipity that I became an associate editor of that book and that led to Baker trusting me enough to write a contract with me on the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. That project led to the Encountering Mission series, and so it's kind of one thing led to another.

At Wheaton, there is a sense that you need to publish. Wheaton just has assistant, associate, and full professor, and then it's emeritus or death. So you only get a few

chances to advance and once you get to the third, there's nothing more you can do. It was nice for me that I could stop there when I reached full professor and not worry, but by then I still liked to write and edit.

But as much as I like to write and edit, I still don't think of myself as a scholar *per se*. That might surprise some people. I think of myself more as an activist-practitioner-scholar. Whether that's good or not, whether that's accurate or not, that's where my head is. I write textbooks, and those involve a level of scholarship, but they're not the same as a scholarly monograph. I also edited the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* journal, which isn't so much a scholarly journal as a feet on the ground training missionaries type of journal.

So those are the types of writings that I'd say characterize me. I'm good at putting out the textbooks. Maybe not the monographs as much, though my most recent book on contextualization would probably fit that category better than my textbooks would, but it still was written with the idea of it being a textbook.

A: *How do you conceptualize or approach a new writing project? You said you have this practitioner-scholar framework. Do you write on something that's gripping you? Or do you write on something that's needed? And then how do you move from idea to the page?*

S: I write on something that's gripping to me. It can be gripping for a number of reasons. When I proposed the Encountering Mission series to Baker, I had access to a database of like 4000 missions courses that were being taught in North America and I was able to catalog or categorize all those and say “here's the reason you need this book in the series” and the publisher loved that because people almost never had research behind what they were proposing. With this proposal, I was able to say you've got 150 courses on Introduction to Missions, Mission History, etc. We need a mission history textbook. My *Introduction to World Missions* didn't need to be justified, but with all the others, I was able to justify the need for the book on the basis of what was being taught in the academy and Baker was thinking of it as a textbook series.

Introduction to World Missions and the *Encountering Intercultural Communication* – those two I was passionate about. The first is for practitioners. The other is half theory, half what does this mean for church planting and discipleship. I've written two books on contextualization because that's what I teach and what I'm passionate about. I wrote on spiritual warfare, in part, to express my voice in the midst of a

cacophony of voices. So much of what was out there was sensationalist or attention grabbing. I wanted a more moderate view that wasn't anti-spiritual warfare, but wasn't so pro that it became evangelistic in a sense. I wanted something in the middle so that's what drove that book for me. So each book had slightly different driving factors. With *EMQ*, I thought, this reaches more missionaries than any other journal. When they asked me to be editor, I loved that part of the picture and had already loved reading the journal. I thought this is something I have a passion for. Seventeen years was a pretty good run with that.

A: *Is there anything that you're working on now or that you've left unwritten that you might mention?*

S: You know, I was just telling a friend of mine that lately I've been dealing with some depression. I'm tired. This was pre-corona. Corona has actually recharged me a little because it suits introverts. Dream come true you know! With an empty nest at home, I can be introverted. My wife is introverted as well.

At this moment, what I've been doing more is having fun making videos, whether for courses or for a church planting network or for my kids at our church. I've been trying to put together things that take advantage of the creativity that books don't quite do for me. I've had dreams of something like quantum missiology – you know, my physics background- but I thought, yeah two people will read that. My colleague and I will enjoy it and that will be it. I've thought about things but nothing is really grabbing me right now. So that's where I stand.

A: *Sure, that makes sense. Tom Steffen said nobody reads books anymore so he doesn't know why anybody writes them. And then he put out another one on oral hermeneutics that has just come out. Ha.*

S: Well, even hearing Tom saying that makes me think. What can I do, not in the Tik Tok world, but in the video world? I have a YouTube channel which I don't broadcast much. That's where I have a lot of material I used for online classes and so on. I've started playing around with things like Doodly that lets you draw in the videos. It takes between one to two hours of work per minute of published video. So a finished video might be 7 minutes and you think that's not much, but it was a lot more work than 7 minutes would imply. And yet that's where our culture has gone. Jay Moon would say it's a digit-oral culture and those types of things appeal to digit-oral people. So maybe that's my next step. Instead of writing books, I'll start making more videos.

I've got this massive collection of images of Christ from around the world. It's 5,335 catalogued images so far with another 1,100 that I haven't cataloged yet – copyrights and other issues. What do I do with that? I've used some of them in presentations and so on. I've made 60 or 70 videos of these with someone like Michael Card or Fernando Ortega playing in the background. Using these images like this takes a wordsmith or a storyteller as they show events in the life of Christ. I really love them for devotions and at conferences, but it's not the kind of thing you can post publicly because of some of the copyright issues. So I'm not sure what to do with all those, but I'd love to figure something out as I'm nearing the age of hanging up the Dean's hat at Wheaton and going off to a green pasture somewhere. I'm probably still looking at around five years until that.

A: *Thanks so much, Scott, for your time and for such an insightful look into your life and work!*

Graduate Distance Education at Wheaton College: Moving from Viability and Efficacy to Refining Pedagogy and Best Practices



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REV. DR. MICHAEL HAKMIN LEE, PhD AND DR. DAVID PEDERSON, PhD

Rev. Dr. Michael Hakmin Lee, PhD, is Associate Professor of Ministry and Leadership and Program Director and Dr. David Pederson, PhD, is the Online Projects Coordinator at Wheaton College.

Introduction: The Rise and Evolution of Distance Education

The U.S. Department of Education (the DOE) defines distance education (or DE) as “education that uses one or more types of technology to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously” (“Distance Education in IPEDS”). DE can be traced back at least to Sir Isaac Pitman, who taught shorthand writing by mail in 1840. Pitman would mail text on postcards to students, and students would mail their assignments back to him. DE has evolved and is evolving alongside advances in technology, which among other things, has greatly reduced the lag and perceived distance between students and their learning environment. The potential for greater reach and accessibility, flexible modes of learning, and the changing economics of higher education has increasingly made DE an appealing and viable educational modality.

Willingly or reluctantly, the COVID-19 pandemic abruptly pushed most American schools to adopt some form of DE. In spring 2020, 77% of public schools were remote and 84% of college students reported having some or all classes moved to online-only instruction (NCES 2023). But even before the global pandemic forced the hands of educational institutions, the growth of various modes of remote education had been one of the most notable trends in formal postsecondary education in the past few decades. Tracking fall enrollment in postsecondary institutions from 2012 to 2021, the DOE reported that the percent of students enrolled in DE courses rose steadily from 25.5% in 2012 to 36.3% in 2019, spiking to 73.4% in 2020, and settling back down to 59% in 2021 (Student Enrollment 2023). Furthermore, student interest or demand for online postsecondary education is only expected to trend upward (CHLOE 7 2022, 4).

As DE has transitioned from the experimental phase to mainstream adoption, research and writing on the efficacy and practices of DE has also proliferated and evolved. We have observed two eras and a possible emerging third era in reviewing literature on DE for the past thirty years. Up until around 2010, the literature largely explored the skepticism about the equality of an online education compared to a traditional in-person class. The driving question in this era centered around DE as a viable and efficacious alternative. However, a turn towards legitimacy was undergirded by hundreds of studies which Thomas Russell notably compiled in his book, *The No Significant Difference Phenomenon* (1999), that concluded that there was “no significant difference” between traditional and distance education as it relates to a large battery of educational outcomes, such as student satisfaction and testing performance. In 2004, the US Department of Education (DOE) released the “National Education Technology Plan.” The plan predicted that online instruction and virtual schools would lead to a new golden age in American education. In November, 2010, Arne Duncan, head of the DOE sent to Congress the plan, “Transforming American Education: Learning Powered by Technology.” This 80-page plan signaled a switch from viability to effective pedagogy. The plan gave no criticism or reference to the ‘no-difference’ language in the 173 times that the plan referenced online education.

Having largely settled the viability question, the second era DE literature shifted towards best practices for asynchronous learning. Several notable developments also accelerated this shift towards examining and fine-tuning online pedagogy. Program management companies emerged and proliferated starting around 2010 to provide services and resources for schools to start or rework their online offerings. Public uproar about the predatory practices of for-profit colleges, who were accused of operating as “greedy diploma mills,” placed a spotlight on the quality of DE education, which led to greater regulation under the Obama administration. There was a subsequent rollback of these measures under Betsy DeVos and the Trump administration (Kreighbaum). Dueling studies in 2019 cautioned the unqualified acceptance of the viability of DE and also called for increased Federal examination for pedagogy (Protopsaltis et.al., Hill). The possible emergence of a third era in which both viability and pedagogy are revisited will be considered at the end.

In what follows, we will share our institutional story of transitioning to DE and the lessons we have learned along the way as we passed through the eras of viability and pedagogy. Reflecting critically on the two ATS peer reports, we will also note what

improvements we hope to make within our programs in the hopes that it might spur ideas for improvements in your educational context.

DE at Wheaton College

In the fall of 2017, a section of the Graduate School at Wheaton College developed online courses to meet the needs of rapidly growing programs in Evangelism, Leadership, Ministry, and Humanitarian Disaster Leadership.¹ These programs have grown from a handful of students to over 250 students over the past five years. We did not jump into fully online programs, purposely weighting our curriculum toward face-to-face (60% to 40%) because of the institutional history of strong push-back toward online programs. Some voices resisted this robust offering of online courses, echoing the concerns of the pre-2010 era of skepticism of online course viability. To counter the push-back, we developed a rigorous amount of asynchronous interaction in each course module and hired prominent lecturers like NT Wright, Harold Netland, and Ray Bakke to create video content in chunks of about 7 minutes per lecture in accordance to commonly recommended best practices (Guo). We wanted curricular standards that would be significantly more rigorous than the face-to-face (f2f) class.

Although some attention around spiritual and community formation was given to our new online courses, our primary evaluative factor was rigor. We thought that rigor, defined as a lot of reading, writing, and listening to lectures, was the answer to the viability question. When considering which courses should be developed in the online modality, our initial thought was that certain courses would be better suited for one modality over another because some courses were more “high touch” than others. We intentionally steered away from courses that we deemed as formation courses.

This overall cautious and rigorous approach was matched by the institution with abundant resources. There was an active commitment to Quality Matters™ and training of staff and professors in the QM™ principles of alignment and clarity. A spacious studio was outfitted and staffed, a learning management system (LMS) administrator and instructional developer gave part of their time, and a full-time online projects coordinator was hired to manage the program expansion. Funds were allotted by the administration to seed the creation of twelve courses, including the hiring of video

¹ These were not the first online programs at Wheaton. Teaching English as a Second Language and Intercultural Studies Departments had started small programs in the decade before. Also, the student survey data used in this paper is based on the feedback from four M.A. degree programs—Ministry Leadership, Evangelism and Leadership, Leadership (formerly Global Leadership), and Humanitarian and Disaster Leadership.

presenters and subject matter experts. Online projects in the previous decade had been “under the radar” but the direction in 2017/2018 academic year culminated in the push for accreditation and the seeking of approval by the Higher Learning Commission for the Wheaton Graduate School to offer online degrees. Key institutional helps were also given through dedicated library resources and partnership with the writing center. The number of faculty trained in QM™ standards was high at first, but declined during the COVID pandemic, so not all faculty building courses or teaching at this time were formally trained.

Prior to COVID, our student evaluations showed that the students were satisfied with the academic rigor of our courses. A slight Likert decrease of 2% expressed student concern with professor and student engagement. We didn’t look deeply into the student comments to comprehend the warning signs of these slightly lower scores. After all, students had plenty of time for engagement during the other courses that were taught as in-person intensives. Also, before significant pedagogical adjustments could be made to increase engagement, COVID struck. The staff and other resources that had been available for online course development were now tasked with bringing the entire campus up to remote-speed.

Fortunately, the student evaluations of the courses continued during COVID and the post-COVID period. Student evaluations ($n=92$) again showed high Likert scores overall. But an AI examination of student comments told a different story. Students had written a total of 518 comments that we manually coded into the five topical categories of Video lecture, Professor engagement, Student Engagement, Organization, and Course content. The large language model AI examined the student comments and the data showed that for all five categories, comments were average 33% more negative than the Likert scores. The engagement element, which is most critical to spiritual formation, showed 49% difference between the comments and Likert. Negative comments focused on the lack of in-person interaction, the difficulty in engaging spiritually, and the frustration of online learning. Some students expressed a preference for face-to-face discussions or live video sessions with the instructor, and others mentioned that the online environment limited their ability to connect with other students. Did this data show inherent weakness in online education or was it the way online spiritual formation was delivered in the Wheaton Graduate School?

Distance Education and Theological Education

The mission of Wheaton’s Litfin School of Mission, Ministry, and Leadership captures our commitment to whole person, “head, heart, hand” formation: [It states] “Inspiring and equipping academically grounded, spiritually maturing, and practically skilled leaders who live out Christ’s mission, proclaiming and demonstrating the gospel and serving the Church in a changing world.” While we have benefited from reviewing DE literature from the broader academic and educational community, given our school’s mission, we are especially interested in the subset of DE literature that speak into the specific concerns and demands of Christian theological education. The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has been especially productive in producing helpful research and literature at this intersection.

For several decades, a steady stream of articles on DE has been published through their journal *Theological Education*. As expected, the broader shifts in the DE literature are also reflected in *Theological Education*. For example, the driving question in Anne Reissner’s article (1999)—can DE be transformational education—is a contextualized version of the first era preoccupation with viability. In a sign of things to come, Reissner concluded, “The schools reviewed in this study offer signs of hope that theological distance education can be transformative education” (1999, 100).

ATS’s work through the Educational Models and Practices in Theological Education project (EMP) is significant second era work (EMP 2017). The EMP was launched around 2016 and eventually secured the participation of over 300 representatives from 110 ATS member schools to investigate the challenges, opportunities, and effective practices related to various educational models and practices. Two of the eighteen peer working groups were tasked with exploring DE. What follows is a summary of key takeaways from their significant work.

Educational Values of Online Education

Seven ATS member schools collaborated in the “Educational Values of Online Education” group to study the challenges and opportunities of DE and to offer general recommendations for good practices and outcomes. Participating schools reaffirmed the efficacy of their online offerings, reporting that “among those who have compared student learning assessment results for their online and their onsite offerings, the vast majority (71%) indicated that the best way to describe those two results was ‘similar’” (2017, 26). In our student surveys, 70% of Wheaton Graduate students said that their online courses were “similar to the average in-person course” or better. One major

deliberation centered on whether ATS standards should differ between online and residential. Recommending that ATS adopt a modality neutral stance in formulating accreditation standards related to quality learning, the peer group noted (2017, 30),

We determined that neither f2f nor online learning was superior to the other even after meeting with the peer group on Formation in Online Contexts. Instead, we feel the ATS standards would be best suited if they are modality-neutral. Good online education will attend to the same concerns that a good residential-based education does, so there is no need to distinguish between the two.

When considering which courses should be developed in the online modality, our initial instinct was that certain courses would be better suited for one modality over another. While that may still turn out to be the case for certain courses and certain educational objectives, what we are finding is that our hesitation in developing an online version of an existing f2f course has more to do with the limitations of our pedagogical imagination rather than any intrinsic limitation that the online modality poses. In particular, reevaluating the assumption that education should be primarily campus-centric, with the exception of occasional field trips, has helped to release pedagogical creativity. The peer group's recommendation of modal neutrality is both an affirmation of the potential efficacy of DE and also for us, a challenge to reimagine what robust, transformative education looks like regardless of modality.

Based on a 2016 survey of 141 academic deans of ATS schools (2017, 24), the report noted that the most significant challenges to online education included faculty training (60%), good instructional design (56%), formation online (51%), and relationship building (34%). According to the same survey, the most significant opportunities and benefits included contextualized learning that occur in the student's home environment, readily reviewable and flexible modality that allows for individualized pacing and review of materials that fit student needs, and a renewed commitment to instructional design that carried over to f2f. We have also found that asynchronous online discussion forums naturally democratize participation more so than discussion in a f2f course, where the participation levels between shy, reserved students and more outgoing, vocal students can be rather stark. DE can also expand the reach of schools, lowering the barrier for students who are unavailable to relocate due to other commitments or because of prohibitive costs. Relatedly, enhanced accessibility can bring more social and experiential diversity within the student body.

According to the report, characteristics of quality online education can be described as accessible, affordable, communal, connected/missional, contextual, deliberate, equitable, flexible, formational, global, rigorous, and thoughtful. Lastly, they propose that effective course design includes explicit expectations, work grounded in specific learning objectives, activities that promote active learning and critical thinking, and addresses diverse learning preferences.

Formation in Online Contexts

Seven other schools collaborated in the “Formation in Online Contexts” peer group, focusing on exploring principles for fostering formation, or whole person development, through DE. Harkening back to the assumptions underlying first era questions, it has been commonly assumed that formation can only happen or best happens in face-to-face (f2f) or residential contexts. As the report observes, there is another common assumption that formation happens naturally in a traditional school setting and ironically, online programs often give more focused attention and intentionality to formation than residential programs. Just as traditional education can be transformative, but not necessarily so, the same can be said about DE. Setting aside the first era question of viability, this report explores the second era concern of how we ought to do DE so that it is formational and transformational in the Christian sense. Six general educational principles for formation are suggested (EMP 2017, 13):

- 1) Each institution must define formation in ways that fit their missions, constituents, and particular degree programs. Models must be shaped with intentional outcomes that are measurable.
- 2) Formation includes preparation for the communities to be served.
- 3) Formation is intensely relational.
- 4) Faculty need to be prepared to contribute to student formation.
- 5) Institutions should recognize online students as “regular students” and value residential and online students equally.
- 6) Outcomes for residential and online students must be the same.

While all the members of this peer group agreed that formation was central to theological education, there were “significant differences” in how the ecclesologically diverse schools understand formation (EMP 2017, 9). What held through their difference though was their collective assumption that belonging and community are

central to the formation process. However programs define and understand formation, they suggest that online programs “must attend to the extracurricular and cocurricular dimensions of theological education and formation that once were assumed to take place through the residential model” (EMP 2017, 9). So, formation for online and traditional residential programs alike must be thoughtfully defined and planned for pedagogically by way of formal, informal, extracurricular, and cocurricular educational experiences. This is a significant growth area for our M.A. programs, which has prompted recent meetings and conversations with various stakeholders like the director of graduate student life and program directors to address gaps in our care for remote students. We have focused our attention on the creation of rigorous online classes and have largely neglected how our online courses are part of a larger, formative educational experience for online students that include opportunities for co-curricular and extracurricular activities. While formation is formally part of the curriculum (e.g., a four hour “Leadership and Spiritual Formation” course for the Evangelism and Leadership degree program, a four hour “Personal Development and Leadership in Ministry” course for the Ministry and Leadership degree program), compared to the ample opportunities like clubs, service opportunities, and lectures readily available to residential undergraduate students, there is relatively little resources allocated for remote graduate students besides livestreamed chapel services.

Studies have demonstrated that effective online pedagogy and positive student outcomes is strongly correlated to perceived instructor engagement and a student’s sense of connectedness to their teachers (Martin and Bolliger 2018; Gillett-Swan 2017, Ma et. al., 2015). Meeting regularly with remote students to mentor and build relationships ought to be seen as a normative part of DE and the formation process. For our remote students, rather than regular office hours where students can pop in for a chat, students are asked to schedule calls on an as needed basis. As such, there is a loss of additional potential contact time and informal community building by way of running into each other in the halls and open office visits. As such, we now ask instructors to schedule synchronous video calls with the class throughout the semester (at least one meeting per credit hour), not for the dissemination of course materials, but for the purpose of approximating being together at the same time and place to support one another.

While remote students may sense a disconnect from the physical campus community, our flexible graduate programs have the potential advantage of allowing students to remain embedded and connected to their present community and ministry

context rather than uprooted, which is also a loss for the community that they serve. Many of our graduate students are currently working vocationally at a church or in a parachurch ministry so our asynchronous courses enable them to remain serving in their ministry and as many students have often commented in their feedback, to immediately apply their learnings to their work. As part of our vision for whole person development, we are also intentional about incorporating assignments that push students toward local and interpersonal engagement and service that fosters community connectivity and the development of “soft skills.” Engagement does not have to be campus centric but again, this requires thoughtful partnering and monitoring of student experiences to ensure that they are accessing both local and school resources that facilitate formation. In this model, the “school is no longer the primary provider of student experiences, but rather an orchestrator of the resources in which the students are embedded” (EMP 2007, 10).

Also, most of our MA Ministry and Leadership and MA Evangelism and Leadership students are part of a cohort that moves through the program together. We have observed that this cohort model helps to foster meaningful relationships and a strong sense of communal belonging among our students, all of which provides the necessary conditions for formation. Students have commented that the fact that they had prior in-person hybrid courses with the peers in their online courses helped them to have a sense of connectedness and community throughout their online experience that they had while in-person. If an in-person gathering is not feasible, programs should consider ways to having remote students build relationships with their peer prior to jumping into an online course.

The report also emphasizes the importance of institutional support in training and resourcing faculty for effective online teaching. It is not unusual for teachers accustomed to traditional modes of education to have strong reservations about teaching online. Common concerns include having to learn and utilize a learning management system (LMS), which requires some technical proficiency. As such, even seasoned teachers must be trained for the particularities of online pedagogy. As other schools with reported, we have benefited from investing in a robust LMS, and in having devoted personnel who have expertise in and can assist with online instructional design and technological support.

Lastly, there should be equity between remote and residential students, both in terms of full and equivalent resource allocation, and expected student outcomes.

Rather than assuming certain learning outcomes cannot be met effectively through DE, like spiritual formation, and hence settling for two different sets of outcomes for remote and residential students, programs should instead be open to being pleasantly surprised by and learning from others who are developing innovative and effective pedagogies. In our graduate programs, our traditional in-person courses have an online version that have the same learning outcomes and in fact, the student learning outcomes match or in some cases exceed that of in-person course. Institutions should also provide comparable resources to remote students, like adapted library access, inclusion into student development programs, and full access to student services. As part of effort to ensure equity and to address the aforementioned growth areas in resource allocation, we are moving towards including survey questions that specifically ask students about their awareness of and their experiences in accessing various resources.

Third Era Recommendations

Whereas the first era of contemporary DE (pre-2010) was characterized by viability and the second (2010-2020) by refining pedagogy, in the shadows of the global pandemic (post-2010), there are indicators that we are transitioning to a third era of reexamining both viability and pedagogy through a student-centric lens. The broad educational landscape has been shifting toward shorter, more flexible degree programs, micro-credentials, certificates, and other non-degree programs. This trend in part stems from a competitive educational marketplace that has shifted more power to educational consumers who are driving demand for such programs. On the other hand, the global pandemic forced many schools to hastily pivot to DE, much of which was done synchronously over video conferencing platforms like Zoom and gave rise to a growing awareness of the potential for technological overdependency and negative social impacts like “Zoom fatigue.” While DE, done well, has been demonstrated to produce great educational outcomes, at what human cost? This puts DE late adopters or laggards in a difficult position to negotiate both market demands and legitimate concerns and weariness about heavily technologically mediated education.

We conclude with some final recommendations for navigating this third era of reexamining viability and pedagogy. First, we recommend incorporating robust student feedback into every level of programming. In constructing questions, consider the areas and issues that were discussed in the two ATS reports. Second, institution support is vital to success, and it may be wise to slow down the process if the level of support and

resourcing is incongruous with an appropriate level of quality (see the twelve characteristics listed in the *Educational Values of Online Education* report). Third, just as schools have an admissions process for traditional students that involves assessing the readiness for academic success, we should likewise think in fresh ways about characteristics that a successful online student for ministry training might need, such as being disciplined and capable of independent learning, and some who is already embedded within a faith community and serving in their community. Finally, we must think holistically about the student experience beyond the quality of each class; we need to continue planning for holistic formation, rather than assuming it will happen naturally. For accessible, flexible, robust theological DE, we must think purposefully and creatively, which may mean discarding the traditional paradigm of the campus-centric model, and leaning into a different paradigm that sees the school as an “orchestrator of the resources in which the students are embedded.”

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Should Orality Return in Bible Interpretation and Communication?



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Abstract

The absence of orality in Bible construction and communication is the “big forgot” and “fatal flaw” for many interpreters coming from book cultures. Overlooking or trivializing orality diminishes God-intended emotive impact, aesthetics, and meaning because the hermeneutic oxygen for interpreting Bible narratives is found in orality. Including holistic orality will make interpretation and application of the spoken-written word of God much more oral, natural, relational, impactful, communicatable, universal, God focused; it will take interpreters beyond the theological headlines to a fuller, richer author-intended meaning.

Introduction

Bible interpreters who inadvertently waded into the murky, muddy, multiple tributaries of orality are those most likely to be tripped up in discovering a fuller meaning of biblical narratives. That is, *unless* some unconscious assumptions are first ascertained and adjusted.

Could comprehending orality advance interpreters beyond Enlightenment-modernity influence? beyond privileged Evangelical pedagogy and hermeneutics?

Does orality throw the Book under the bus? Or does orality enhance the Book, requiring new rungs for our hermeneutic ladder?

How pervasive is orality in Scripture? Does the oral-aural energize, enhance meaning? What happens if orality is overlooked or trivialized, particularly in the narrative sections of Scripture?

This article offers a working definition of orality followed by five often unassumed assumptions related to how orality influenced Bible composition and communication. Could a better grasp of these assumptions enhance Bible interpretation and communication? I conclude with some strategic questions that could help answer the above question. The question that drives this article is, What happens in Bible interpretation and communication if the role of orality in Scripture is overlooked or minimized?

Types of Bible Interpreters

Bible interpreters generally fall into two camps—professionals who spent significant time formally studying Scripture and practitioners who mostly studied Scripture non-formally. For many from the West, including Easterners who studied under them, were highly literate. Books, dissertations, libraries, syllabuses, PowerPoints, research papers, tests, automatically accompanied.

The same holds true for critical thinking—cause-and-effect logic that takes interpreters linearly (compared to circular, spiral, uncharted journey¹) and literally through intentionally fragmented parts to granular status. In the Evangelical world, the grammatical-historical hermeneutic tends to receive most favored nation status as does systematic theology with its cognitive concepts and categories.

Interestingly, it's difficult to find a prominent hermeneutic textbook, old or new, that addresses orality in canon construction and interpretation.² Know any? Does anything get lost?

Types of Oralists

The setting was a training session for Ansipolo municipality workers held at the Town Hall in Ifugao Province, Philippines, in 2018. The acting Mayor graced the tribal audience that represented two dialects. A selected group had composed a new song for the municipality to be sung in all government-run schools. Test time had arrived.

¹ While the West tends to name theologies—Latin, Asian, African, Black—not so for its own, including color (white). This assumes its theology—unlike others—is universal. No designate is therefore necessary. Have we done the same with logic? Do we assume authentic, universal logic is propositional?

² I recently asked a hermeneutic professor: “Are you aware of any (old to new) *recognized* hermeneutic books that address orality?” “Unfortunately (or fortunately?),” he responded, “I can’t add anything to the reading list.” In *Scripture as Communication*, Jeannine Brown includes a single footnote citing Ong’s classic *Orality and Literacy*.

The leader wrote the song and music notes on paper and taped it to a building for all to see. She moved seamlessly from two Ifugao dialects to English.

The leader then proceeded from measure to measure (three to four words each) singing each three times. She went through the entire three-verse song following the same pattern.

We learned about quarter and half notes, minors, full and half beats. By the end of 20 measures the audience was distracted, bored, fidgety. A brave young girl raised her hand and in English asked the following very respectfully to someone her senior in a strongly shame-oriented culture, “Madame, could you please just sing the entire song for us so we can understand it?” To save face, the moderator immediately tried to deflect the stinging, shameful, insulting question: “She did this, so we don’t make a mistake.”

The leader sang through the song again, repeatedly stopping after every measure. For some reason she found it difficult to sing through the song in its entirety. After the fragmented rendition she finally sang the complete song. The audience then sang it in its entirety. A sense of relief followed. A fragmented song had finally given way communally to its full beauty and impact.

Because the tributaries of orality are multiple, murky, and muddy, *no* monolithic form of orality prevails globally. Rather, *oralities* exist. This includes cities and rural communities; the present and the past; oral and visual literature as well as print literature. Driven by required context-specific contextualization, oralities evidence multiple expressions having no hard edges (see Finnegan, 2005). Various examples follow.

Some, like my Ifugao friends, grew up where orality influenced *every* aspect of life. For them, orality is, as someone sagely summarized, “unconscious competence.” Most Ifugao are naturals at it; they unconsciously and with great competence know how to “read” people, rooms, and what’s written on the wall. They know the social cues, including those of different generations.

In the Ifugao case study, a well-educated youth who spoke at least three languages, could read print and music, still wanted more than the visual taped on the wall; she wanted to hear the *entire* song sung corporately—holism being another strong component of orality—to capture its fullness. A fragmented and fatigued version just

didn't cut it. She represents someone, not unlike the author of Revelation (1:11, 19; 19:9; 21:5), who has a deep appreciation for both ear gate, eye gate, and sensory gate.

Others, e.g., a growing number of Americans groomed by social media are unconsciously meandering into orality. Their skills to read people and contexts are growing even as they morph from strong individuality to small communities of kindred spirits e.g., music, sports, food, politics. These digital-AI natives find their oral competence maturing yet different from others.

Many of those strongly immersed in print media, however, view the reintroduction of orality as a step backwards on the evolutionally communication scale. Still others view it as another colonial ploy for control. Afterall, the print-digital-AI world is where it's at; it's hip; it offers a road to a financial future. Returning to the orality of one's grandparents is perceived as old fashion, a dead-end street.

Such thinking, sadly, finds itself in much of theological education. In that literacy is believed to have trumped orality, why waste time giving it any thought? Afterall, the Bible came to us as a printed book. Deal with it! Or did it?

We must not overlook the fact that at some level, *everyone is an oralists*; that “no literate is orallless” (Steffen and Bjoraker, 64). Babies recognize the voice of their mothers immediately when born. Voice, sound, and symbols (shorthand for extended meaning) are never far from God's highest creation throughout their entire lifecycle. Even good Bible translations are not *orallless*.

Does orality offer the discerning a wider window to God?

What is Orality?

Defining orality is like trying to pick up mercury. When you think you have it, it slips away. Simply stated, orality is, “*holistic communication embodied in relationships that create social identities*” (Steffen and Neu 2024, 125 emphasis original). It centers on sound, particularly voice, heard externally and emotionally through the ear gate and heard, sensed, and viewed internally via the theater of one's mind and inner voice.

As holistic communication, orality also centers on symbols, images, among others, captured through the eye gate. The actions one takes from perceptions garnered through the ear-eye-sensory gates create celebrated to criticized social levels (see Thigpen 2020).

Orality's Multi-dimensional Framework

Orality encompasses at least a six-dimensional framework. This complex, holistic, multidimensional, integrative mode of communication minimally incorporates sound, relationships, the sensory, symbols, pictorial images, aesthetics, rational. Such a kaleidoscope of frames deliberately creates ambiguity, elusiveness, forever calling interpreters back for further reflection and application. Orality serves more as a conduit for partial and unfinished meaning than a finished repository for meticulously and systematically laid out conceptual categories.

Orality prefers to begin with concrete relationships (human, spiritual, material) and branch out. A necessary part of this outreach, claims Goold, includes the aesthetic, “For oral learners, art-making is not an optional aesthetic experience. Art is functionally necessary” (2014, 88).

Art also influences interpretation. Hermeneutics is much more than a mechanical process; it also includes an *artistic process*; it is semantics-plus. Part of the plus includes the affective, the sensory, beauty, impact. This requires interpretation to minimally include the ear, eye, and sensory gates. Holistic communication found in orality that pervades Scripture speaks in a polished way, communicating passionately, powerfully, persuasively, even as it offers promises and predictions. Have we needlessly aggrandized print? Not unlike the Trinity, the sacred has a strong artistic component that promotes and requires affective responses.

While print is designed for thinking and analysis, orality is designed for feeling and action. Recall the emotional-based actions of Abraham with Isaac or Rahab with the spies. Their obedience required more than submission and faith, it also required emotion-based action. “Without actions,” declares James, “*faith is useless*” (2:17 VOICE emphasis original). Orality conveys meaning through demonstrated emotion-based actions.

Orality marries mood and meaning to the moment and milieu. Wise Bible interpreters are competent art clarifiers.

Expanding the Orality Definition

With this brief background, it's time to thicken the definition of orality: “*By choice or circumstance, multiple variants of orality include a natural, universal, living (socially embodied), holistic (appealing, impactful, multisensory, rational, boundaried) modes of*

relating and communicating—receiving, reflecting, remembering, rehearsing, relaying—that wed ear (sound) and eye (sight) often in an indirect circular spiral or casual fashion, all of which create social identities and ideologies individually and collectively” (Steffen and Neu 2024, 125).

Orality finds individuals and communities traversing an everchanging continuum with literacy and the digital-AI world. Ong called this “residual orality” defined as “habits of thought and expression . . . deriving from the dominance of the oral as a medium in a given culture” (1971, 27-28). Recall the young Ifugao girl’s question to the seasoned instructor.

Ong (2002) preferred to see the oral and literate modes of communication as divided, juxtaposed, polarizing, competitive. That perception was soon challenged as they are much more interrelated and interactive than Ong postulated. Viewing these interactive modes of communication as a contentious continuum seems much more realistic.

Ruth Finnegan contends, “the idea that the use of writing automatically deals a death blow to oral literary forms has nothing to support it” (1992, 160). She then points out how writing, just as the oral, includes numerous non-verbal clues for the reader, e.g., “layout, spacing, and orientation” (2005, 173, 174). Bolded and italicized words, symbols such as “ ”, ?, !, \$ —, emojis, also provide the reader additional clues even as calligraphy moves letters into a visual art show. Good writing, like good art, tells a story.

Finnegan continues, noting how computers through color, shapes, icons, moving images, dissolves “the boundaries between picture, writing, and graphic.” She correctly concludes whether oral, written, or visual literature, *all* are “multimodal and contextualized” (2005, 174).

Overemphasizing one literature form over another does an injustice to all. Differences does not necessarily mean inferiority. When overlapped, meaning often raises to a higher level. Print, influenced by other media, e.g., music, dance, art, paraphernalia, brings added dimension and depth to lone words. Assigning “top drawer” to a specific mode of communication media is myopic.

Where placed on the oral-print-digital-AI continuum, individually or collectively, can be perceived as honorable to shameful. Many today perceive their worth, identity, approval, safety, or security wrapped up in the ability to read and/or employ the digital/AI world. From exhilarating to devastating, mental consequences result.

For many in the Bible hermeneutic world, orality is the “big forgot” and “the flaw of the excluded voice” (Steffen and Neu 2024, 136). Does Bible interpretation begin with written text? Is the hermeneutic oxygen for the narrative sections of Scripture found squarely in orality? Does minimizing the role of orality (sound, story, symbols, imagination, emotions, relationships, pictorial images, rational) in Scripture minimize meaning and applications? The following five assumptions may reveal some answers.

Five Assumptions Often Minimized

Every hermeneutical theory is driven by biased assumptions. Such assumptions are difficult to recognize because they are the socio-cultural air we breathe.

Erickson claims, “A given hermeneutic will need to be understood as part of a much larger system of thought, and that system will have to be carefully evaluated” (Erickson 1993, 123). Few, however, identify, much less analyze, the assumptions that drive their theoretical hermeneutic framework. With few if any oral apprehensions or alarms, many march blindly forward in cerebral comfort.

Five often unassumed assumptions related to orality in Scripture follow.

Assumption One: The Spoken Word Preceded the Written Word

The spoken word, God’s voice, was heard long before being written. “Before time itself was measured, the Voice was speaking. The Voice was and is God.” John 1:1 VOICE. God first breathed out words, *not* manuscripts (see Song 2011). Yet *both were God breathed*. God’s message to the world did *not* begin with a book.

Both testaments began as shared communal oral tradition. The Synoptic Gospels “were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses” (Luke 1:2 NIV). Luke “wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1:1 NIV). Add to these “the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42 NIV) and Paul’s instructions (1 Cor 2:13; 11:2, 23; 15:1-3; 1 Thes 2:13, 4:2; 2 Thes 2:15). Authoritative oral tradition preceded authoritative written text.

That Jesus wrote nothing down of his teachings nor asked anyone to do so demonstrates his assumed understanding of oral tradition. For those groomed in print, this may be difficult to grasp. Eye-earwitness oralists, however, could precisely remember Jesus’ vivid voiced teachings decades later (Jn 14:26b).

Unfortunately, many of today's Scripture miners have a low view of voice. Karpf notes:

we have very little collective sense in Western societies of the importance of the voice . . . We persist instead with the idea that the move from a primarily oral to a mainly literate society has made the voice much less important than the image and the written word, as if the voice belonged at the periphery of human experience, rather than at its center (2006, 3).

Kaarpf continues, "Literacy, however, downgrades intonation and our sensitivity to it, preferring to use grammar and syntax to help establish meaning. . . . The arrival of printing and literacy changed the voice's status — *decentered* it from official life" (2006, 200, 201 emphasis added). How much thought have interpreters given to the sounds of Scripture? Have interpreters marginalized voice? Does written text talk?

Hearon observes, "Since these 'written remains' were largely dictated, the 'remains' are, in fact, texts that began in oral expression and were 'actualized' in performance through the reoralization of the words." What results if interpreters overlook the "oral remains?" She continues, "To view them wholly as written texts, then, is to miss an important dimension of their function and to misconstrue how they were experienced in the ancient Mediterranean world" (2004, 97).

Finnegan concludes, "Oral literature is by definition dependent on a performer who formulates it in words on a special occasion" (2012, 2). Horsley adds, "We cannot assume that texts were written to be 'studied' and 'interpreted' as in scholarly print-culture" (2010, 97). The spoken word preceded the written word, and both were authoritative.

Assumption Two: Print Blinds Many to Scripture's Oral Features

What blind spots impact the oral features of Scripture? One is the neglect by many in the academy, assemblies, and agencies (3-As) of the foundational role orality had on textual formation and teaching. Our strong print background has blinded and blunted many to the pervasive oral terms related to the ear gate that dot the soil of Scripture: "call," "tell," "teach," "shout," "listen," "hear," "heard," "ear," "voice," "tongue," "said," "speak," "sing," "announce," "proclaim," "preach," "teach," "exhort," "messenger," "word of mouth," "remember."

Since the ear and eye are intrinsically integrated in canon construction, note also the inventory of words associated with the eye-gate: “eyes,” “gaze,” “guard,” “heed,” “survey,” “examine,” “read,” “write,” “look,” “behold,” “beware,” “worry,” “watch,” “see,” “dreams,” “visions.”

Sensory terms also connect to orality, e.g., “cry,” “tears,” “laugh,” “taste,” “feel,” “touch,” “pain,” “sweet,” “sour,” “vomit,” “lament,” “shame,” “honor,” “grieve,” “joy,” “smile,” “frown,” “despair.” While we read such terms related to the ear-eye-sensory gates, *few connect them to their oral origins.*

Bible authors not only used multiple oral terms, they also styled their writing in ways conducive to memorization. Matthew, e.g., does so by arranging “things in a way that is easy for the reader to memorize. He arranges things in threes and sevens. There are three messages to Joseph; three denials of Peter; three questions of Pilot; seven parables of the Kingdom in chapter 13; seven woes to the Scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23” (Barclay 1975, 8).

The 3-As neglect by many of the influential role *orality* had on text and teaching also impacts interpretation. Generally, a strong print background blinds and blunts them to the fact that the Bible is “a collection of sacred, religious texts orally composed for eventual oral articulation” (Wendland 2010, 6). The highly print-oriented, therefore, naturally tend to perceive meaning located in written words rather than situational spoken sounds.

Kelber correctly implores, “If [only] we can wean ourselves from the notion that texts constitute the center of gravity in tradition” (1994, 163). Loubser offers reasons for realignment, “Almost by default, most people living in modern literate cultures are ‘media blind’ . . . it [oral poetics] goes against the grain of our deep-seated literate inclinations” (2013, 4, 74).

Lewis concurs, “the greatest barrier between us and our ancestors is the categorical barrier between oral and literary structures” (1987, 457). Ryken believes “literary” is a “logical extension” of grammatico-historical[-literary] (1984, 12). Alter adds, “As modern readers of the Bible, we need to relearn something of this mode of perception that was second nature to the original audience” (1981, 62).

Bible communicators often require knowing antiquity’s multiple contexts. Part of that context includes knowing how those oralists perceived, interpreted,

communicated, implemented, remembered, relayed. It also requires knowing the variations of how oralists discerned truth and persuaded peers.

Assumption Three: The Spoken Word Influenced the Written Word

The spoken word influenced the written word because Scripture was written primarily for the ear. Horsley therefore calls Scripture “oral-derived texts” (1999, 60). A copied text, writes Carr, “stood as a permanent reference point for an ongoing process of largely oral recitation” (2005, 4). Assmann assumes, “Text is speech in the status of a mnemonic mark” (2011, 72). Walton and Sandy conclude, “Written texts were shaped by their oral origins. They began as oral texts and were derived from oral texts. Scribes preserved the marks of orality in inscribed forms, which meant the differences between the two were almost negligible” (2013, 176-77).

Scripture became a “sound print” hybrid as the spoken influenced the written and vice versa. The written text, which “never exists without orality” (Ong 2002, 8), protects the spoken-heard text. While in antiquity “Written texts may have been secondary,” they “were not discounted altogether” (Walton and Sandy 2013, 237). Sound and script sync well.

Wire distinguishes how this hybrid utilizes both spoken and written. She believes writing “limits a story by recording only words, whereas storytelling depends for effective communication as much on the speaker’s tone, volume, pace, gestures and embodiment of direct discourse as on the words spoken” (2004, 100).

Such hybridism means *every* telling requires socio-cultural contextualization. When the storyteller does not make such adjustments, someone will be sure to let him/her know verbally or nonverbally that something is amiss. Even so, the antiquity majority tended to perceive this hybrid as strongly oral in nature. Boundaried-contextualized rhetoric reigned in texts, presentations, hermeneutics, application.

“Thus says the Lord” appears some 400 times in the OT. Jesus repeatedly said, “you have heard it *said*.” Loubser calls Paul an “oral theologian” (1995, 67) because he generously oralized his written letters. Flemming explains, “Paul’s writings are less a collection of doctrinal studies than a series of theological conversations between the apostle and his diverse audiences with their life circumstances” (2005, 105).

Scripture is strongly speech-sourced writing where personalities integrate and augment propositions, characters with concepts, visuals with voice. Influenced predominately by oral audiences, OT and NT authors refused to insist listeners settle for

print alone (Harris 1989). Rather, they wisely adjusted the text for the ear, heart, and memory, not just the eye (mind and documents). Some no doubt memorized-performed-read as they re-oralized the dictated text thereby completing the oral circuit.

Spirit-guided ancient authors knew how to make the written assessable to the oral majority; they knew how to ease the tension between script and sound; they knew how to make the “written” word become the “spoken-written” word so that it became credible (Horsley 2010, 98), comprehensible, applicable, memorable, repeatable.

Again, Karpf, “literacy didn’t replace orality, only supplemented it” (2006, 204). For the most part, the early Israelites and Christ followers were not given the *written* word of God on perishable parchments, rather, they (and us) received the *spoken-written* word of God. Not to grasp the hybrid nature of Scripture confirms one’s blindness to the significant role orality played in influencing, developing, and advancing Scripture.

Maxey summarizes, “The Bible was for the most part created, transmitted, and received in a predominantly oral context” (2009, 1). From foundation to finish, orality fashioned the formation and function of Scripture thereby designing it, not unlike the Trinity, primarily for relationship-based dialogue and action. *Text preserved orality*.

Assumption Four: Not Only did Voice Precede Text, Voice Followed Text

Centuries following written text, voice still played a major role in assuring credibility, interpretation, and communication. Stock synthesizes, “the rules of oratorical discourse invaded the world of texts” (1984, 26). Hearon expands, “Alongside this perception of the text as ‘written,’ however, is the experience of the written text as, principally, a spoken word that is read aloud, received, and remembered.” She continues:

Equally strong is both the perception and encounter of the text as a living voice that continues to speak to the present . . . The Hebrew Scriptures, therefore, are representative of the complex relationship between written and spoken word. They are perceived of as both written word and spoken word (as having “voice”), yet they are most often encountered and employed as spoken word (2010, 65).

Spoken Voice *refused* to be distant or detached from the written Voice. Written script speaks because it is spoken script! Written scripts are living, speaking scripts; they

speak metaphorically! How strongly has our print background *undervalued* speaking and listening in relation to the spoken-written word of God?

Because most ancients assumed sound to be superior to script, reputable teachers relied on memory and mouth, *not* the written text. They also assumed reading should *not* be conducted silently or in solitude. Achtemeier concludes, “Reading was therefore oral performance *whenever* it occurred and in whatever circumstances. Late antiquity knew nothing of the ‘silent, solitary reader’” (1990, 17).

The same was similar for NT times. Reading required: 1) the power of voice which “intones the voice of God through vocal cords,” 2) the text *be read out loud* (Acts 8:30; Col 4:16) to hear the “still small voice,” (1 Kings 19:12 KJV), 3) be read *in community* as a shared experiential event (Col 4:16; 1 Tim 4:13) (Berger 2003, 38, 47, 99), 4) be heard *in its entirety* (assumes boundaries), and 5) audience feedback (dialogue and debate) throughout.

Antiquity’s equivalent for today’s printed document was an oral public event where memory, proclamation-performance, dialogue (“creating the tale together” Vansina 1985, 34), deliberation prevailed. Most first-century faithful or fickle followers of “the Way” perceived the word of God *not* as lifeless “print on the page” (Rhoads 2008, 4) but rather as *live* embodied proclamation-performance. Scrolls served as signs—unrelational reminders; the spoken served as relational reminders.

Rhoads raises some poignant questions:

Can you imagine a musicologist who does nothing but sit in libraries and study the score of a composition without ever hearing a performance of it? Would it not seem strange for interpreters of drama, including ancient Greek drama, to analyze a play apart from interpretations of it in performance? Similarly, does it not seem odd that biblical critics interpret writings that were composed in and for oral performance—as gospels, letters, and apocalypses were—without ever experiencing performances of them and without giving some attention to the nature of the performance of these works in ancient and modern times (2006, 110)?

Teachers shifting from a highly print-dominant culture to become a storyteller means one has applied to become a text performer-proclaimer.

For uninhibited imagination to prevail, some paradigm shifts may be necessary to begin to appreciate the powerful role of performance in antiquity. Rhoads continues, “When we seek to imagine performances in oral cultures, we moderns need to shift our thinking from written to oral, from private to public, from ‘public readers’ to performers, from silent readers to listeners/audience, from individual to communal audience, and from manuscript transmission to oral transmission” (2006, 123). Performance-proclamation makes it a corporate, memorable event (enacted discourse).

Once print existed, it was never a one-way street even when one media dominated. Tension between the two has always existed. “Oral texts,” writes Botha, “depended on writing for their survival while written texts were dependent on those oral aspects for their legitimacy” (2012, xvi). The psalmist adds: “Write this down for the next generation so people not yet born will praise God” Ps 102:18. MSG. The interfacing of the *spoken-written* word prevailed in antiquity, thereby presenting not only pedagogical preferences but also generational preservation.

Nor did the transition from sound to silence happen overnight. As Ong explains, “even after the development of writing, the pristine oral-aural modes of knowledge storage and retrievals still dominate . . . When writing first appeared, it did not immediately wipe out or supplant oral-aural modes of thought and verbalization. Rather it accentuated and codified them” (1977, 214). Literacy, “was used to enhance and facilitate orality” (Dewey 1995, 45). Karpf’s summary for today rings true of antiquity, “voice has remained . . . a weapon of mass persuasion” (2006, 213). Viva voice!

Assumption Five: Narratives in Scripture Require Orality for Fuller Emotional Comprehension

What perishes in print? Bible authors wrote not merely to elicit *cerebral clarity*, but also to generate collective *informed action* through *imaginative*³ and *emotive* impact! Through orality’s enhanced experience feature, stories speak, offering a surplus of imaginative-emotional-based appeal, impact, and demonstration that encourages hearers-readers to serve themselves, society, and the Supreme One.

Orality *layers meaning* in multiple ways, one by incorporating the sensory which increases personal-collective emotive impact. Bradt, e.g., believes, “Story knows more as said than can ever be articulated—through indirection, suggestion, tone, and

³ Richard Hays perports “Spirit-led imagination, an imagination converted by the Word, is an essential faculty for the work of theological exegesis” (Hays, 2020, 39).

dynamics” (1997, 108). Brown asserts such incorporations do “not denigrate the cognitive elements of a text’s message” and that “we are not limited to an either-or choice between cognitive content and noncognitive purposes in texts.” Rather, the noncognitive deserves “a fair representation in our discussion of textual meaning” (2021, 6).

Meaning in Scripture is tied not just to “what” is said, but also “how” it is said. This seems to infer the mind follows the heart. Few in the 3-As on the print side of the spoken-written Scripture ledger have been taught to engage in the cinematic nature of Bible *characters* to discover the sensory side of story. Rather, most have been taught to immediately identify the *theological headline*.

Ryken reminds interpreters to *slow down*. Let the lives of characters develop in their fullness so they can capture and critique us. Why? Because Creator sovereignly chose Bible characters to become his talking points and positions. “It’s God talk in human-talk” (Sandy 2024, 12). “*What’s the headline?*” should be initiated by “*Who’s the headline?*”

Can Bible interpreters experience the realities of characters *before* assigning principles? “Truth is experiential,” reasons Ryken, “as well as ideational” (Ryken, 2018, 26). Truth is more than *told* ideas or finite facts; it moves beyond the “possible and provable” to include the mysterious visual, sound, senses, and activities of Bible characters.

Ryken and Longman wave this warning flag, “literary texts are irreducible to propositional statements and single meanings. A propositional statement or a theme can never be a substitute or even the appointed goal of experiencing a literary text” (1993, 17). Ryken adds, “a story does not have a unifying topic but a unifying *action*” (2018, 79). Orality is naturally oriented towards a character’s sensory-influenced expectations and actions, transporting interpreters beyond principles to piety.

Finnegan digs deeper, “the bare words cannot be left to speak for themselves, for the simple reason that in the actual literary work so much else is necessarily and intimately involved” (2012, 17). Truth goes beyond ancient silent scribbles, syntax, grammar; it requires conversations and actions demonstrated in context. Truth requires movement beyond correct or incorrect to good and evil, beyond mere reflection to observable engagement. As Darrell Bock says, “We were made in the image of God to image God to others.”

How could the conversations, conduct, and conflicts of the main characters challenge, confirm, or compound current interpretation? What new questions might emerge?

Theology is conveyed most powerfully and thoroughly when demonstrated through *living relationships*. Until a storied event where relationships reign is grasped, theology tends to remain naked ideas having minimal imaginative, emotional, or transformative appeal or impact. God-imaged characters challenge and change all this.

Focusing exclusively or even minimally on *theological ideas deplatforms, demystifies, deoralizes, devoices, denarratizes, deevents, deenfleshes, deembodies, deexhibits, decenters, decharacterizes, derenders, deabsorbs, and depersonalizes the dominate literary genre of Scripture—narrative. Worse yet, it deincarnates the Chief Character—Jesus—making Him a philosophical Idea rather than a participating Person in the Trinity’s ongoing story* (Steffen and Neu 2024, 118).

Conversely, orality presents interpreters with creative tensions that beg for resolution. For example: 1) oral layers and literary layers, 2) concrete relationships that are experiential and abstract rational that is cognitive in nature,⁴ 3) dramatic and expository, 4) mystery and facts, 5) practice and theory, 6) reading characters and context and reading grammar, 7) the experienced and the excavated, 8) fragments and holism where divisive “either-or” gives way to the more harmonious and deeper “both-and.” Orality swims in an ocean of creative tensions.

Summarizing, orality connects not just people through stories, but also hearts and places. This opens the door for an *army of amateurs* to interpret Bible stories, not just those formally trained!

The spoken-written hybrid Word is foundational to a full-orbed, more robust understanding of Scripture’s narratives, and their Author. “The long trail of orality, which for many of us has mostly been hidden from sight, is now difficult not to see” (Sandy 2024, 184).

⁴ Perry Shaw recognizes some changes are required in that “traditional theological education has tended to focus on the development of the mind as the primary mandate of institutional learning. This emphasis finds its roots in Greek philosophy and the Enlightenment. A more theologically grounded understanding of pedagogy recognizes the holistic nature of learning.” Shaw, 2014, 29.

Illuminating Overlooked Questions

Even though print bias has blinded many Bible interpreters to at least five assumptions surrounding orality, the impaired vision does not end there. It also carries over into the questions asked.

Until something enters one's radar screen, questions remain unasked. Unasked questions retain the status quo. The same is true for orality and Bible interpretation. A Ghanaian proverb is instructive: "The one who asks questions doesn't lose his way."⁵

It is time to ponder some questions that have received too little attention in Evangelical textbooks and therefore hermeneutic classes and home Bible studies around the globe. Following are some questions that should eventually cross an interpreter's radar screen in that they can redefine and reposition current comprehension:

- Did God consider the spoken words of the prophets and apostles of equal weight with later written text?
- How does the *spoken-written* word of God differ from the *written* word of God?
- How did scribes accommodate oral learners?
- What level of oral articulation does Scripture assign itself?
- What are the limits of propositional logic? narrative logic?
- How does science-based hermeneutics hinder interpretation of Scripture's narratives? enhance it?
- What role did performance-proclamation (re-oralizing text) play in communicating Scripture in antiquity?
- How do hearing and reading skillsets differ?
- How has print blinded and blunted interpreters to the significant role of orality in the construction and interpretation of Scripture?
- When does the oral submit to the written? the written submit to the oral?
- How long did it take for written text to gain creditability over oral text?
- When did orality's influence on the written text die?
- What parishes in print?

⁵ <https://medium.com/@davidafrika279/ten-african-proverbs-fa4dbfea1ce6>. All too often in theological education interpreters are not given permission to be wrong. How could imagination-sourced questions advance the Kingdom?

- How does grammatical-historical differ from grammatical-historical-literary?
- How did ancient audiences anticipate structured verbal and non-verbal oral clues?
- How were texts in antiquity expected to be interpreted?
- How did oral text become written text?
- How does one read Scripture designed to be heard?
- How does the host culture make truth judgments?
- How does the host culture persuade peers?
- If life-changing transformation (theological education) occurred predominately in participatory corporate worship in antiquity, what implications should this have for today?
- What is the cost of minimizing orality in Bible interpretation and communication?
- What is your theology of orality?
- Who on your hermeneutic team has broad oral-artistry skills?

While Bible interpreters may never have all the right answers, the journey begins by asking insightful questions. Are the questions the answers?

Wise Bible interpreters assume finality is overvalued when it comes to asking questions or discerning answers.⁶ What other questions would you add?

Focuses and Forays

The five assumptions raise some thought-provoking questions in relation to the composition and communication of Scripture. Do interpreters in the 3-As have a hearing problem? a vision problem? a sensory problem?

Van der Toorn concludes, “the oral does not die, but its authority is subordinate to that of the written text” (2007, 218). As literary tourists blinded by a long literary history, we tend to miss part of the quote—orality’s imprint on Scripture *never* dies. We tend to forget Scripture is “oral to the core” (1990, 19). Authoritative biblical texts were written primarily for the collective ear.

⁶ After 35 chapters of “advice” from Job’s “friends,” God again enters the story in the last five chapters. In the concluding 134 verses Reueler *begins* not with corrective advice, *but with a question followed by 60 others*, one of which Job repeats. Did he do this to secure Job’s attention so his advice stood a chance to be heard?

Scripture's oral influence ("the big forgot" and "the flaw of the excluded voice") must *never be overlooked or trivialized if interpreters wish to advance beyond mere theological headlines to a fuller, richer grasp* of the spoken-written word of God. Oral residue remains from Alpha to Omega because the Bible is the *spoken-written* word of God. This requires *all* Bible interpreters be grounded in orality which minimally impacts one's hermeneutic, theology, apologetic. Recall the absence of orality in hermeneutic textbooks.

Orality focuses on *how to relate* rather than *what to believe*. This should come as no surprise considering the Trinity's relational nature. Orality has Trinitarian roots.

Contextualized orality resonates in this "Age of Imagination" (Greene and Robinson 2008, xxxi, 21) since it offers a lonely world the tension between mystery and specifics, the experiential and theoretical, genuine and hollow relationships, characters and cognitive categories. It is time to add some new rungs to our hermeneutic ladder.

Scripture integrates and augments the oral and text. Even so, interpretive start points matter. Respect for the narrative genre implies orality be the initiator. This symbiotic relationship insinuates the added rungs be placed at the *bottom* of the hermeneutic ladder. While the oral does not have the final word, it should have the first.

It is time for an oral/text *continuum* to replace the *seesaw* where text is perceived as up (superior) and orality as down (inferior). Such seesaw misunderstanding creates winners and losers while a continuum creates winners on both sides. Function should supersede mode.

Overlooking or trivializing orality in canon construction, interpretation, or communication diminishes God-intended emotive impact, aesthetics, and meaning. Orality is the flaw for many interpreters coming from book cultures. The hermeneutic oxygen for interpreting Bible narratives, however, is found in orality. Out of respect for the narrative genre and to bless the nations, it's time to add some oral-based interpretive rungs to the bottom of our hermeneutic ladder. This will make interpretation and application much more oral, natural, relational, impactful, communicatable, universal, God focused.

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Field Readiness and Majority World Missionaries: A Case Study in Taking the Grand Narrative to the Final Frontier



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ABSTRACT¹

In 2019, the United States established the Space Force whose goal involved maintaining “field combat-ready forces.” They required a resilient and ready force, one embracing innovation and emerging technologies for engaging in a new mission. What might field combat readiness involve in modern missions? As a veteran missionary, I have not always felt field-ready. What about national counterparts, those taking the Grand Narrative of Scripture to the final language groups yet to hear?

In this case study exploring the preparation of national workers for this task in a difficult field, I grapple with the concept of field readiness and needed competencies. Even though the national workers studied culture and worldview, Scripture, orality, security issues, and other subjects, both workers and trainers I interviewed did not feel pre-field coursework sufficiently equipped them for the struggles they faced. I propose a five-pronged course of action for succeeding in this sort of narrative warfare.

Introduction

It was the honor of a lifetime. Although I had worked in Asia for twenty-five years, what I witnessed in 2022 surpassed that privilege. I sat with young adults from three people groups. Operating in a fourth language, the national language, the group worked hard to decipher the language of an unreached people. Not yet possessing the skills to learn that unwritten language, two national workers sought the help of a colleague whose ministry uses a widely-used method of language learning – the Thomson’s (n.d.) Growing Participator Approach (GPA).

¹ Due to the sensitive nature of this case study, the author uses a pseudonym and protects the identity and location of those involved.

Well after pre-field training, these two young workers took a break from fieldwork to concentrate on learning the language of their audience. In 2022, they were painstakingly learning nouns and verbs, then beginning to form sentences and paragraphs – all so they might craft Bible stories, some songs of praise, and most importantly, a metanarrative of Scripture, (the Grand Narrative or C2C, Creation to Christ).

One lone speaker of the target audience traveled a great distance to act as an informant. Rounding out the setting, the facilitator, known as a nurturer, patiently facilitated their language learning using the Growing Participator Approach.

Why was I in that sacred room? I spoke none of the languages present. Instead, I spoke a different Asian language, one with a written script and millions of speakers. As a consultant, I interjected thoughts toward creating a contextualized Grand Narrative of Scripture. During the weeks together, they discovered their informant had no word for “God,” no word for “heaven” or “hell,” or so many other concepts necessary for sharing the Good News. When they could unearth no word for “heaven,” I advised them to call it “God’s home.” Those who followed God became part of His family, and their names were written in God’s “family book,” something familiar in that part of the world. I prodded toward simplicity and understanding.

Over many days, they painstakingly formulated a song of praise to the Creator and Savior. The day they sang that short hymn I sobbed. For the first time that we knew, the One who had made that language was praised with it. To me, that was the honor of a lifetime.

One year later I returned to a different story. I happened to converse with a trainer of the two national missionaries and their counterparts. This experienced teacher’s heart seemed heavy with all the group had experienced. Mostly a young cohort sent out by two’s, some had been jailed; some had quit; and during imprisonment, one exposed names and locations so that the training needed to move. Trials abounded, but so did triumphs. People heard the Gospel, and some were saved. Some workers even met their future mates during training.

While exploring this case, I discovered a publication about the program. I cannot cite that text lest it endanger the work. The author, a trailblazer and visionary, faced difficulties just like those national counterparts. Like so many of us, that leader wanted to complete the Great Commission quickly.

According to the book and my friend, over approximately four months, the group studied worldview, as well as Scripture and sanctification. They memorized God's Word and applied it to their lives. They learned to baptize and do the Lord's Supper, create a metanarrative of Scripture, and tell stories to oral learners. The training emphasized personal growth and discipleship while implementing all the students were taught.

After the workers arrived in their assigned villages, they faced various challenges. I already knew of one – how to learn a new language – prompting the scenario in 2022. Sometimes no common language could be found, so they encountered communication issues. Female workers sometimes faced harassment. Most workers lacked an identity to enter new villages and became suspect, a situation that stood in contrast to that of other colleagues with platforms of doing business as mission, but that was not their focus.

Other obstacles? When I sat with the two pioneer missionaries in 2022 and worked with other national partners, I noticed most were very traditional and tended to share a standard version of the Gospel with no contextualization. They did not seem to know how to adapt even after training; and like many other missionaries, they seemed to believe they grasped the Gospel, and there was no need to adapt it for understanding.

Both the book and my friend told of faithful people who shared God's great story far and wide, who took enormous risks with joy, and who persevered during trying situations. They also employed some oral strategies, such as Bible storying and sharing C2C (the Grand Narrative); however, I could see how further training and additional strategies could help.

My friend agreed the potential workers seemed young and inexperienced, a bit spiritually immature, and could have benefited from a longer training period. As I had watched the two learn a language from their informant, I agreed. They were easily distracted and seemed to lack the tenacity it takes to truly master a language. I hoped I was wrong and prayed fervently they would complete the task.

Majority World Missionaries Taking the Grand Narrative to the Final Frontier

I do not want to portray this case in a negative light. The work of these "called-out-ones" resulted in salvations. Mentoring the younger generation and launching them

into ministry is critical. We should, however, want to learn from their experience. We want Majority World missionaries to take the Gospel to the remaining tribes and tongues. However, this task often occurs in hard places, as this case portrayed. In fact, Keyes and Pate believed workers to be headed into “a new world disorder” (1993, 198).

With missions increasingly becoming a “polycentric” endeavor, with more Christians living in the Global South (Johnson, Crossing, and Ryu 2004, 2), and more Christian leaders in the Majority World (Yeh 2016; Yeh 2024, 9; Zurlo 2021, 17), their training is our concern because “this surplus in numbers is not yet matched with opportunities to grow in depth (training, education, resources, discipleship, rather than evangelism)” (Yeh 2024, 10). Some time ago, Pate (1991, 60) also declared, “The rapid growth of the Two-Thirds World missions movement is creating an emergency need for adequate missionary training.” To launch missionaries, much less Majority World missionaries, without adequate training is “disastrous” (Harley 1995, 22).

Oral or connected learners comprise much of that final frontier for which Majority World missionaries are being trained (Thigpen 2020). The oral majority are “big picture learners” and need to hear a metanarrative of Scripture first (Steffen 2010). This audience might not be ready to read, but some are ready to hear. Taking the Grand Narrative to the front lines means this story must be contextualized for worldview and freely available, whether through social media or SD cards.

Secular research discusses this kind of “narrative warfare” and using “counter narratives” (Maan and Cobaugh 2018), but Christians typically do not. The frontline worker engages daily in spiritual warfare, confronting false narratives held by their audience. Echoing Lewis, McGrath (2019, 98) maintained, “To break the spell of one narrative, a better narrative needs to be told.” On the field, this requires depth in language and culture acquisition. “One must get familiar with the narrative terrain in order to recognize a narrative and stories associated with it, particularly when it has culturally unfamiliar structure or content” (Maan and Cobaugh 2018). Some in this case study did not seem ready for this battle.

Competency-Based Training for Field Readiness

Taking the Grand Narrative to the final frontier requires special attributes and abilities. As mentioned in the abstract, even the United States Space Force requires “field combat-ready forces” (Department of the Air Force 2023). Given the level of spiritual

warfare in hard places, field “combat” readiness seems critical. What tools do Majority World missionaries such as the ones in this case study need to engage in this kind of narrative warfare, to learn language and culture, and craft the Grand Narrative into an understandable and worldview-specific format? The following explores this question.

Many of our predecessors knew how to persevere in hard places. Finn (1989, 69) maintained the early church “survived in Rome to a large extent because they developed a dynamic ritual process for the making of Christians.” Deep, consistent training in community was key. Similarly, Bonhoeffer trained in difficult times. When a friend visited Finkenwalde and questioned the grassroots enterprise, Bonhoeffer took him to a nearby Nazi training facility and reportedly shared, “This must be stronger than that . . . Our formation has to be stronger than the formation of the world” (Tyson 2020, 12).

Modern missionary education differs markedly from that of the early church and Finkenwalde. I had several Master’s degrees before going to the field but did not feel ready to learn language and culture deeply nor equipped to teach oral learners. Similarly, Bolsinger (2015, 11) declared, “Seminary didn’t prepare me for this!” and wrote a “guidebook for learning to lead in a world we weren’t prepared for” (13). While Western missionaries sometimes feel “inadequately” trained (Udall 2013, Whiteman 2008), national missionary training may equally suffer (Jung-Woon 2007). Lack of training can result in some high attrition rates (Brynjolfson 2004, Brynjolfson and Lewis 2006, Bloecher 2004, Taylor 1997), as “agencies with lower attrition have higher requirements regarding missiological training” (Bloecher 2013, 54).

Contrasting this case study with the experience of Gupta (and Lingenfelter 2006, 57), the latter launched church planters in India, but discovered “planting churches outside their own language area proved far more challenging than anyone imagined. Indians found cross-cultural evangelism in their own nation as difficult or more so than going to Europe or Africa,” and that their “non-formal training for church planters working in their own cultures failed utterly to prepare cross-cultural missionaries.” As a result, Gupta reworked training to include a process of phases with mentoring and experiential learning and progressively deeper study of topics such as cultural anthropology and cross-cultural communication. Like Hay et al. (2013, 183), they learned “missiological training appears to be more beneficial than theological training.” Finally, the trainees learned to disciple peoples with no written language and no Christian resources. According to Lingenfelter (Gupta and Lingenfelter 2006, 75), they also learned they needed “more mature, well-educated Christians” for such

arduous and crucial ministry. This decision contrasts with the sending of younger candidates in the case study I present.

Vermont (2020, 274) explored training for “frontier missionaries” and called for “accessible, phased, competency-based, culturally unbiased, hybrid, experiential, social constructivist courses” based on sound adult learning principles. Illeris (2016, 245) also maintained: “The competent person is able to act appropriately in specific areas or in specific kinds of situations, and this must be emphasised [sic] because it is a demand that clearly exceeds prevailing understandings of knowledge as the central aim of learn and education.” Hibbert and Hibbert (2016, 138) also contrasted a “competency-based learning design and a knowledge-transmission model” and applauded the former.

One might attain the requisite amount of learning but still be unable to perform essential tasks. Understanding the Gospel, theological concepts, the content of Scripture, and theories surrounding anthropology and intercultural communication is not enough. The successful missionary must be competent enough to contextualize Scripture so the audience might understand, and the seed not be stolen (Matthew 13:19). Focusing on competencies solves that dilemma.

How might one organize the requisite competencies? Their focus cannot simply be cognitive. The traditional taxonomies list cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, the “head, heart, and hands.” Parks (2016) shared a three-phase plan for a “trans-national, trans-organizational, and trans-denominational movement catalyst training process” focused on the same three dimensions. Witt (2023, 43) called this “relational missionary formation,” while Wan and Hedinger (2017) and Wan and Nguyen (2014) used the term “relational missionary training.” Brynjolfson and Lewis (2006, 28) referred to training that emphasizes the head, heart, and hands as “integral ministry training,” “a holistic endeavor that the ReMAP studies found to improve missionary retention.”

Witt (2023, 99-100) developed a questionnaire and researched “aspects of holistic training” needed: “detailed intellectual or mental preparation, spiritual or character development, psychological or emotional development, practical and personal training, relational development, physical preparation.” Likewise, Kayser (1999, 428-430) discovered the following predictors of cross-cultural competence: 1) competency-related characteristics (learning oriented, other oriented, and action oriented), 2) spiritual dynamics, 3) social interpersonal skills, 4) personal growth, and 5) family life.

Illeris (2007, 87-88; 2016) considered three dimensions of learning – content, incentive (emotion, motivation, and will), and social.

Since missionary learning must address all of life, I expand the head-heart-hands components to include the spiritual (Holy Spirit) and the relational (“herd”), as Illeris advises. Wall (2015, 185) likewise stated, “I suggest that ‘head-heart-hands’ as it has been understood is not an adequate description of whole person learning.” The life and work of the believer involves more than the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor dimensions. We are called to relate well to others and walk in the Spirit, two critical additional dimensions. Some make the social the arena, but for collectivistic cultures, the relational aspect looms large. Figure 1 depicts the head, heart, hands, “herd,” and Holy Spirit learning components necessary in training for field readiness.

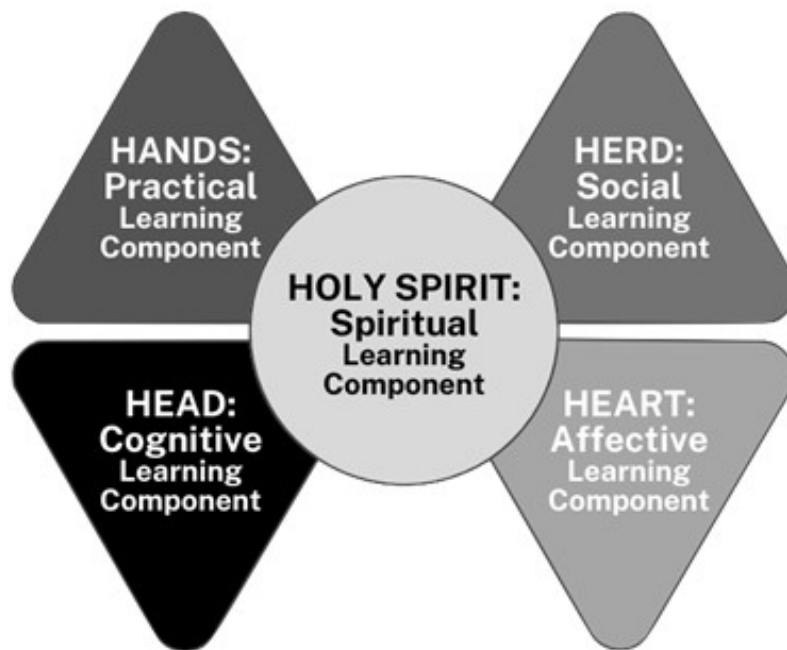


Figure 1. Learning Components for Field Readiness Training

Exploring relevant research and various agency best practices and benchmarks (Agron 2002; Allen, et al. 2009; Arnold 2023; Burns et al. 2013, 16; Brynjolfson and Lewis 2006, 13; Dagne 2022; Ferris 1995; Hoke and Roche 2007; Kayser 1999; Lee 2008; McBride 2021; Prinz and Goldhor 2023; Senanayake 2018; Tuggle 2019, 37; Vermont 2020, 212-221; Whiteman 2008; Wilson et al. 2007, 9), along with the author’s long-term experience, a long list of competencies results. Table 1 represents the synthesis and organization of some competencies needed for field readiness according to the five learning components.

Learning Component	Necessary Competencies The worker can do the following:
Head - Cognitive Readiness	<i>General Readiness to Learn</i> • Be involved in lifelong learning and be open to new ideas. • Have a growth mindset (versus a fixed mindset). <i>Scriptural Readiness</i> • Know the content of Scripture and how to teach it. • Create a metanarrative of Scripture with a specific theme. • Maintain a good theology for all areas of life. • Commit meaningful Scripture verses to memory. <i>Intercultural Readiness (Cognitive)</i> • Accomplish tasks using the language (through perseverance). • Learn language from any speaker. • Study worldview and cultural values (such honor/shame, collectivism, etc.) and be able to explain them in technical terms. • Explore culture through ethnographic research and participant observation that seeks for emic understanding. • Understand the barriers and bridges of the target audience in regard to the Gospel. • Tell Bible stories in a way that builds bridges to the target worldview. • Create contextualized story sets and train others to do so. • Engage in narrative warfare with understanding, respect, and kindness. <i>Cognitive Readiness to Teach/Train/Equip</i> • Ascertain the learning style of a person/audience and adjust teaching methods (oral versus literate, for instance). • Evangelize, disciple, equip, train, and develop leaders in culturally appropriate ways. • Train others in evangelism and church planting. • Strategize in order to complete plans and goals. • “Pass the baton” of mission work to local believers.
Heart - (Affective or Emotional) Personal Readiness	<i>Personal/Emotional Readiness toward God</i> • Maintain a relationship with God – know, love, and relate well to Him. • Maintain a teachable heart. • Take a Sabbath rest. • Embrace obedience and faithfulness as a measure of success. <i>Personal/Emotional Readiness toward Self</i> • Maintain emotional health. • Balance work, play, and other life responsibilities. • Laugh at one’s own mistakes (especially in language learning) • Monitor personal expectations. • Walk in joy and thankfulness, without complaining. • Persevere through difficult tasks with grit and self-control. <i>Emotional Readiness toward Others</i> • Walk in love and peace with a heart of forgiveness. • Be flexible and kind when changes take place or faced with obstacles. • Avoid ethnocentrism and racism. • Have a heart prepared for persecution.

Learning Component	Necessary Competencies The worker can do the following:
Holy Spirit – Spiritual Readiness	<i>Spiritual Readiness: Inner Life</i> • Maintain a consistent and vibrant spiritual life in prayer, fasting, worship, and study of Scripture. • Maintain a rhythm of spiritual disciplines for spiritual formation. • Engage in spiritual warfare through prayer and with discernment. • Demonstrate love and thankfulness to God. <i>Spiritual Readiness: Outer Life</i> • Walk in the gifts, fruit, and power of the Spirit. • Maintain an obedient and growing stance toward God and His will. • Hear the voice of God and receive direction to make wise decisions.
Hands - Practical Readiness	<i>Life Skills</i> • Learn new skills required for daily life. • Balance a budget and live within one's means. • Care for basic medical issues and emergencies (first aid). • Maintain a healthy physical lifestyle. • Maintain good time management. • Maintain and use local modes of transportation. • Adapt to standards of dress and etiquette according to culture. <i>Security Skills</i> • Provide a simple truthful statement of identity and purpose and maintain that identity and platform. • Navigate security issues. <i>Technical Skills</i> • Engage in participant observation. • Implement GPA language learning techniques. • Write unknown sounds using the International Phonetic Alphabet. • Learn new technical skills as needed (especially for recording and analyzing new languages). <i>Pastoral Skills</i> • Perform baptism and the Lord's Supper (and teach to do so). • Engage in "narrative warfare" using truth to combat lies.
Herd - Relational Readiness	<i>Relational Readiness: With the Body of Christ and with its Head</i> • Relate well to local and home congregation and leadership. • Create a prayer network and communicate regularly. • Pray in community, with and for others. <i>Relational Readiness: Field Community</i> • Seek and cultivate opportunities to share the Gospel, including hospitality. • Approach language learning relationally. • Cooperate and communicate honestly, kindly, and effectively. • Deal with conflict and criticism. • Maintain healthy family relationships, including child discipline. • Operate according to biblical ethics and integrity. • Respectful and loving toward all (genders and cultures). <i>Relational Readiness: Leadership</i> • Walk in humility whether serving or leading. • Submit to godly authority. • Delegate responsibility as needed. • Equip others to do ministry.

Head Preparation and Cognitive Readiness

What cognitive competencies are needed to take the Grand Narrative to the final frontier? Missionaries should be adequately trained in Scripture, and that cognitive element is usually the focus to the exclusion of many others in Table 1. However, we also find the need for a general readiness to learn, scriptural readiness, intercultural readiness, and readiness to teach/train/equip. It is beyond the scope of this paper to cover all of these, but some merit discussion.

I came to the mission field knowing Scripture but had little training in exploring culture, in engaging in “human exegesis,” as Hiebert (2009, 12) advised. After over a decade of ministry, I pursued further studies to rectify my lack. Among the most valuable things I learned were how to conduct ethnographic research and participant observation, how to explore cultural values, such as honor/shame, and how to deal with animism. “One of the most critical components of missionary preparation is intercultural readiness” (Lee 2019, 248).

In addition, I found one of the critical activities in which missionaries engage daily – working in a second language – was overlooked in our training. Most workers are surprised by the amount of work it takes to learn a language, according to Sawin (2013, 6). The second ReMAP (“Reducing Missionary Attrition Project”) study (Bloecher n.d., 2) found organizations that prioritize “continuous language and culture studies” had greater retention of personnel. Communicative competence in the language is directly associated with being comfortable in the new setting and developing friendships (Dewey, et al. 2015, 104). “Deeper relationships may lead to conversations that require higher levels of language proficiency, as feelings, opinions, abstract topics, etc. are discussed” (Dewey, et al. 2015, 103). See also Thigpen’s (2023) ethnosopic analysis.

As a former language and culture coach, I found Thomson’s (n.d.) Growing Participator Approach (GPA) effective for learning a language and uniquely formatted to help learn unwritten languages, such as the national workers in this case study. Others, such as Dagne (2022, 144) and Sawin (2013, 435) agreed. In addition to GPA, the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (NCSSFL-ACTFL 2017) provide “can do” statements for each level of language learning. Learners can readily assess progress and competency by completing activities.

Learning to do ethnographic research in the language made all the difference in my ministry. Equipped with that tool, I explored deep worldview issues. In the case study, knowing the language informant might be animistic, I asked questions about his experience with the spirit world. Where once he seemed bored, his face lit up while telling the story of meeting a spiritual being at night on a lonely road. His worldview exposed, I challenged the two national workers to contextualize their Grand Narrative, but my words fell on deaf ears. Instead of making animism a bridge to help them know more about the power of God, the workers slipped back into a general, traditional presentation. Here, they failed at narrative warfare, as I did many times before. According to the research of Allen et al. (2009, 118-119), fruitful workers know how to “use a variety of approaches in sharing the Gospel,” and they do so “in ways that fit the learning preferences of their audience.”

Also in the cognitive arena, I needed to learn more about orality, as did those in this case study. Johnson, Crossing, and Ryu (2004, 3) stated, “By 2024, nearly 1 billion people will still be illiterate, underling the need for audio-visual communication.” The tools for engaging in effective narrative warfare lie in the field of orality. Workers must be trained to meet the needs of non-readers, to create contextualized metanarratives of Scripture and teach using stories, songs and other applicable formats, along with audio and video resources. Although more could be discussed about this, we move to the heart and personal/emotional readiness.

Heart Preparation and Personal and Emotional Readiness

Personal/emotional readiness toward God, toward one’s self, and toward others can result in character shaped to persevere. The list of related competencies may seem daunting but not impossible. Since “the goal of our instruction” is not cognitive, but rather “love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5 NASB), the affective element looms large. Here we take cognitive learning and apply it to our lives to live holy before God, walk rightly with our neighbor, and learn to appreciate culture, while avoiding ethnocentrism and racism, “the refusal to love others in their difference” (Shorter 1999, 78).

One’s cognitive beliefs might be strongly held, but when emotions suffer, living overseas can become difficult. Two notable secular researchers have explored what it takes to succeed. One researched grit and self-control, the other mindset. Their work directly applies to missions.

Just as those with outstanding scores do not necessarily graduate from rigorous training institutions such as West Point (Duckworth 2016, 14), not all missionary candidates “make it.” Duckworth (2016, 17) researched those who succeed despite opposition and measured “grit,” “the tenacious pursuit of a dominant superordinate goal despite setbacks” (Duckworth and Gross 2014, 319), or “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (Duckworth et al. 2007, 1087). Besides grit, Duckworth and Gross (2014) found self-control to be another predictor of success. “Self-control entails aligning actions with any valued goal despite momentarily more alluring alternatives” (Duckworth and Gross 2014, 319). The Grit Scale appears useful for surveying potential missionary candidates.

Along these lines, Dweck and Yeager (2019, 484) found, “Mindsets can play a role in the desire for challenging learning and in the persistence of that desire even in the face of obstacles or failures.” A growth mindset is critical for persevering through language acquisition. This research seems to say if missionaries engage in character formation that results in grit, self-control, and a growth mindset, they are more likely to succeed.

According to Bloecher (2013, 47), in 1993 national missionaries in Brazil lost 75% of their counterparts in their early years,” so the World Evangelical Alliance launched a study and found most left the field for the following reasons: “lack of missionary’s commitment, moral failure, lack of spiritual and financial support, health problems, doubt about calling, conflicts with co-missionaries, disagreements over policies, lack of supervision, project end, spiritual immaturity, relational problems with local leaders at the place of service.” Brynjolfson (2004, 74-78) also learned workers wanted holistic training and listed the top reasons for attrition being conflict with peers, personal concerns, lack of commitment, spiritual immaturity, lack of cultural adaptation, and inappropriate training.

Holy Spirit Preparation and Spiritual Readiness

Our battle is not with flesh and blood but is a spiritual one (Ephesians 6:12). According to Allen et al. (2009, 118), fruitful workers abide in Christ, have a vibrant prayer life, and “persevere through difficulty and suffering.” In Table 1 two elements emerge here – spiritual readiness concerning the inner life and spiritual readiness that manifests in outward practices. Kayser (1999, 445) also found, “Spiritual dynamics are of greater importance than any other single dimension for cross-cultural competence.” As Willard (1993) noted, “The goal of Christian spirituality is conformity to Christ – not togetherness, or meditation, or acceptance. The issue is discipleship. Discipleship is

learning from Jesus Christ how to live my life as He would live it if He were me.” One cannot succeed without growth in this area.

Hand Preparation and Practical Readiness

We might divide competencies dealing with practical readiness into life skills, security skills, technical skills, and pastoral skills. Ranging from being able to use chopsticks to being able to baptize someone, this preparation can be as vital as any. For instance, in the case study, some entered remote villages where there was no common language. In that case, they could have used recording devices to record snippets of the language for later comparison and a bank of various languages recorded so villagers could listen for comparison.

In such pioneer work, one would benefit from training in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), to learn to write sounds that cannot be written in the local script. Finally, oral Bible translators (Floor 2021, Cleaver 2023) are making headway in creating an oral Grand Narrative for the remaining minority languages by using software such as Render (Zylstra 2016). This endeavor requires a high degree of language acquisition and a willingness to complete the task (grit), as well as longevity. Explore Table 1 for further competencies.

“Herd” Preparation and Relational Readiness

The final necessary element in training pioneer workers is social, the “herd” element, or relating to God’s flock and others. Dividing those competencies, we see relational readiness in three areas: with the Body of Christ and with its Head, with the field community, and with leadership. Even competencies listed with the cognitive, affective, or practical might be found here in their relational form. For instance, language learning involves more than memorizing words or phrases. It should be highly relational, with missionaries leaving their classrooms and studies to interact with others.

Returning to the discussion of Bonhoeffer’s training at Finkenwalde, Johnson and Larsen (2013, 169) felt like failures in creating koinonia at church after studying Bonhoeffer’s legacy and confessed, “What I did not understand was that it [“the big narrative of the gospel”] needed to be reinforced with a new ritual, a counter liturgy that encompassed the entire community.” Given that many cultures around the globe are collectivistic, competencies in this area could strongly affect one’s witness. Moon (2018, 278), in his insightful chapter entitled “Chicken Theology,” proposed

understanding the communal nature of our audiences and encouraging group learning holistically. Finally, “issues of character and relationships” often send workers home (Brynjolfson and Lewis 2006, 28).

Mathew (2020, 44) wrote his dissertation on “persistent pioneers,” missionaries to unreached people groups in India. He maintained those pioneers needed to learn to lead without explicit authority in the villages where they went. Their authority manifested in humble servanthood. In that vein, McCullough (2017, 2) explored “global humility,” and advised, “Pride and mission are polar opposites.”

Ideally, the whole process of implementing training in field readiness should look like Figure 2. After being armed with Scriptural knowledge, with spiritual formation, practical and relational skills, along with grit and self-control, the worker can begin to learn language deeply to engage in cultural studies, all focusing on developing oral and narrative resources (especially the Grand Narrative) that are worldview-specific.

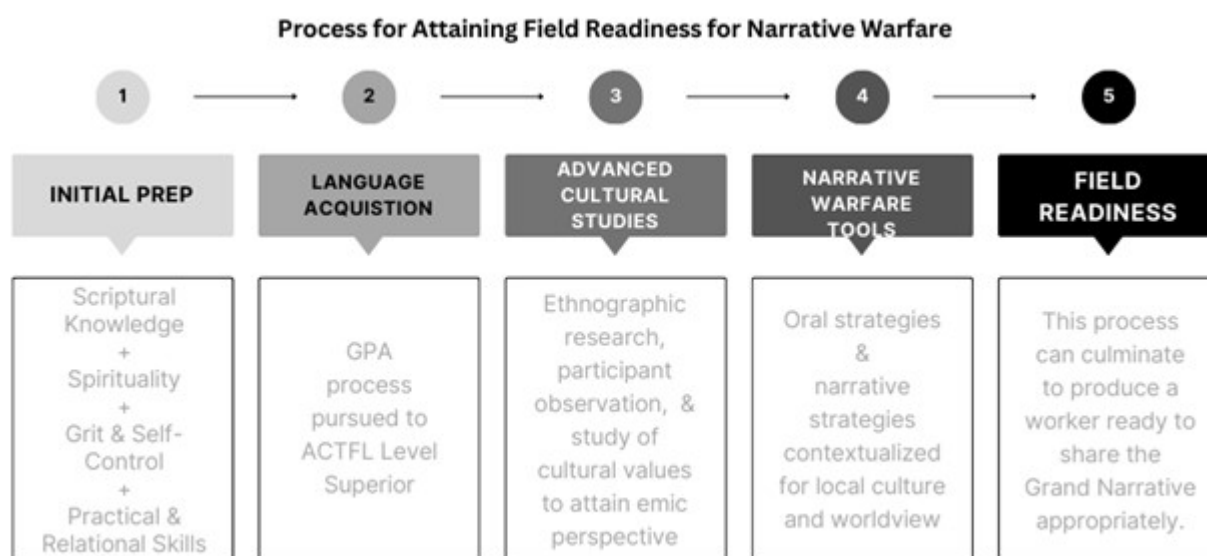


Figure 2. Process for Attaining Field Readiness for Narrative Warfare

Conclusion

Missions has moved from the West as center to polycentrism and “everyone everywhere,” so a desperate need exists to equip co-laborers with tools and training to reach the final frontier. After examining a case study of national missionaries working in a hard place, I proposed a five-pronged approach to competencies they need, an approach that not only touches the head, heart, and hands, but also emphasizes the social/relational aspects of the task, the “herd” or flock, and the spirituality (from the Holy Spirit) needed to be field combat ready for the spiritual warfare in which we are engaged. Some of the most essential competencies for field readiness in pioneer situations include grit, self-control, spirituality, the ability to learn an unwritten language to explore culture deeply, understanding orality, and embracing new technologies. All these serve to make the cross-culturally worker ready to craft a worldview-specific Grand Narrative of Scripture. As Adams (in Eenigenburg and Burkholder 2023, xii) explained:

What cross-cultural workers face is not an issue of geography, personalities, or people groups, but rather a war of cosmic proportions, a spiritual war beyond our full comprehension and for which we mortal humans need grit and grace.

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Density, Intensity, Diversity, Influence, and Community: Preparing Missionaries for the Global Urban Context



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Abstract

Today, over half of the world's population lives in cities. Global mission strategy should focus more on urban areas due to these growing numbers and because of the strategic communities that live there, including influencers, the under-resourced, immigrants, and young people.

This article develops an evangelical, holistic model for training missionaries to work in the density, intensity, diversity, influence, and community of global cities. This model teaches missionaries how to study complex urban contexts, prepares them for the intensity of urban life and ministry leadership, and helps them understand strategic urban communities and apply holistic methods for urban ministry. Studying in diverse learning communities has been found to improve this model as well.

Introduction

Today, we live in an urban world. Over half of the world's population lives in cities, with Europe, North America, and Latin America all having urban populations of 74% or higher. As urbanization continues, we expect over 2/3 of all people to live in urban areas by 2050, with 90% of that increase coming in Asia and Africa (United Nations 2018). The world is truly becoming more and more urban with each passing year.

Thus, based on sheer numbers, evangelicals that are interested in missions must seriously consider how to do more effective missionary work in urban areas. Yet, even beyond the numbers of urbanization, there are several groups or communities in urban

areas that deserve special attention. **These strategic urban communities are influencers, the under-resourced, migrants and immigrants, and young people** (Hildreth 2014).

The first strategic urban community includes people that exert special influence on others, both within urban areas and often far beyond them. These include government officials, businesspeople, media, educators, and artists, among many others. Having an impact for the Gospel upon this community could have far-reaching results.

The second strategic urban community is the under-resourced, including the poor, those struggling with dependencies, and those that are homeless or living in slums. Jesus stressed the importance of ministry to the poor and needy, even stating that caring for those most in need was equivalent to loving and caring for Jesus Himself (Matthew 25:31ff). Thus, ministry to the under-resourced should be a strategic priority of evangelical missionary work as well.

Thirdly, urban areas attract growing numbers of migrants and immigrants, including those from unreached people groups. As people move to cities from both rural areas and across international borders, they seek work, housing, education, or sometimes simply survival. Urban migrants and immigrants are uprooted from their home cultures and religions, and thus, they are often more open to humanitarian help and the Gospel. Furthermore, if some of these migrants or immigrants come to Christ, it can open doors for the Gospel back in their home villages and countries (Johnstone with Merrill 2015, 19).

It is interesting to note that Tim Keller, who has given leadership to urban churches and the global urban movement, “Redeemer City to City,” claimed that impacting these three groups is the best way to influence the future of the city and the culture (Keller, 2016). Yet if this is true, the future of the city and the culture will be even more impacted by ministry to a fourth strategic urban community: young people.

Cities are incubators for the growing global youth culture. As young people are connected through technology and opportunities in urban areas, they often have more in common with one another across the world than with older generations within their own cultures. These young people are searching for meaning, identity, and community, even as some of them prepare to be future leaders of the world. Thus, to impact the future urbanizing world, evangelical missionaries must consider how to better minister to global urban youth.

The Challenge of Preparing Missionaries for the Global Urban Context

Since there are both statistical and strategic reasons to focus more missionary work on the world's cities, we should prioritize preparing missionaries for the global urban context.¹ This new context requires new thinking and new skills for missionary training and education in order to overcome several shortcomings of traditional missionary preparation.

But how did we get here? Why have Western evangelicals not increased their missionary work in cities naturally along with the growth of urbanization over the past century and a half? In the early 20th century in the United States, “the great reversal” occurred (Moberg 2006, 11). Up until that time, evangelical Christians were significantly involved in both local urban ministry and global missionary ministry. A. T. Pierson was a great example of this in the late 19th century, both pastoring prominent urban churches in the US and promoting global missions (Robert 2003).

Unfortunately, the great reversal happened when evangelicals rejected “the social gospel” that liberal churches actively promoted in cities. Evangelicals became more and more concerned with individual, private faith, most retreated to the suburbs, and they decided to focus on overseas missionary work, typically in rural areas, where the “unreached” lived. Evangelical ministry in local urban areas was largely abandoned (Conn 1994, 89, 93; Moberg 2006). Only in the past 50 years have evangelicals slowly started to become active in urban ministry again (Conn 1994, 106ff). Therefore, evangelicals’ involvement in cross-cultural global mission has been separated from urban mission most of the past century.

Thus, it is not surprising that missionaries have typically been prepared for work overseas by focusing on learning a new language and a new culture to minister to monocultural, rural people, often using methods from anthropology. Yet in modern urban contexts, multiple cultures may be encountered, including hybrid mixing of cultures. Multiple languages may be needed, or in some cases, one common language will be the most important (although extra languages are always helpful!) as immigrants strive to learn the national language or a common language, such as English.

¹ There are theological reasons as well (see Crane 2021), but they are not the focus of this paper.

Furthermore, social, economic, political, and justice issues can be very important in cities. Missionaries often lack skills that could be helpful in dealing with these issues. A better understanding of sociology, economics, political science, and urban studies could help missionaries in global urban contexts. Methods such as community organizing and establishing community centers, that in the past have been left to liberal churches or to government or private institutions, need to be considered and utilized for global urban mission.

Missionary training tends to focus on individual spiritual and cultural issues, but often the best ministries in cities are formed when the place and needs of the community are central. Each city and neighborhood in a city has its own history, mix of cultures, and social issues. Missionaries need to understand how to better analyze the place of their ministry (not just the broader culture) and how to understand and better integrate into the local community. Missionaries need to think less about the “missionary field” where they work and more about the community which they and their church are joining.

And in addition to traditional training on how to deal with cultural shock and stress, global urban missionaries need to be prepared for the fast pace and multitasking of urban life. The intensity and temptations that abound in cities can overwhelm missionaries, leading to burn out or falling into sin. The fast pace of urban life affects many aspects of ministry as well, including developing leadership, doing evangelism, and establishing healthy, contextual methods of discipleship.

Finally, we need to consider what educational materials are needed. What books and training materials would be good resources for global urban missionaries to use as they study their cities and consider potential kinds of ministry? In some cases, resources might not exist for a particular city, or, for example, there is no resource that comprehensively explains the history of global urban mission. In our situation at my seminary in Ukraine, we had to translate and publish several books on urban mission, including books on the theology of urban mission, ministry to the poor, urban church planting, and community organizing. All training must include good educational materials for students to analyze, apply, and reference in the future.

Contours of an Evangelical, Holistic Model for Mission in Global Cities

Considering the multifaceted nature of cities and the importance of social, economic, and justice issues in them, it is logical that urban mission must be holistic in nature. Yet, it is that holistic nature that has concerned many evangelical missionaries who did not want to slip into liberalism as they ministered to people's physical needs. Thus, we need to develop an evangelical, holistic model for mission that is both biblical and effective in cities.

In order to maintain an evangelical focus for urban mission, we can turn to the Lausanne Covenant, a document affirmed by a wide representation of evangelicals around the world. This document promotes the idea that evangelism and social concern are both important, and although social action does not directly lead to personal salvation, one's saving faith should naturally lead to Christian social responsibility (Lausanne Covenant, 1974). Thus, the call from much of the Global South "for a holistic ministry to match the holism of the city" (Conn and Ortiz 2001, 225) is a call that must be answered, although never separated from the priority of evangelism that leads to people's personal salvation and reconciliation with God.

So, we can start with Mark Gornik's definition of holistic ministry in the context of urban church planting as being spiritual, social, and economic (Gornik 1997, 241). And from there, considering both local and global urban contexts, **we can define an evangelical, holistic model for urban mission as one that considers and appropriately addresses spiritual, cultural, social, economic, and justice issues.** In other words, an evangelical, holistic model should address one's relationship with God, with one's larger culture, with one's community, with the economy, and with the government and other institutions that have power and give order to the community. Let me also qualify this definition by adding that our model follows the Lausanne Covenant in that it will always prioritize spiritual issues while attempting to minister to as many of the other areas as appropriate and effective.

In developing this model, I have been a part of an academic team creating a master's program, "Mission in the Modern City," for Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary in Kyiv, Ukraine. I have also worked with my American mission organization, WorldVenture, to construct a strategy for urban mission for our global workers.

In Ukraine, we started our work on this model by consulting with local urban church and ministry leaders. Then, we looked at various kinds of urban mission programs in the West, although most of these programs were focused on the local urban context and not a global one. After developing this model in the Ukrainian academic context for several years, I started working on an urban strategy for WorldVenture. This task led me to consult with numerous urban missionaries from around the world that worked in different and sometimes multiple cities.

Listening to these varied voices and working with teachers and students in our master's program in Ukraine, an evangelical, holistic model started to form. This model has been modified over the past several years as various needs and opportunities have presented themselves. In addition to consulting with different urban ministry leaders, this model has directly interacted with numerous Ukrainian students, several African students, and many American missionaries. We have learned some helpful lessons and had some success, but there is certainly a lot still to learn, especially as we consider different urban contexts around the world.

This model has four parts, each part reflecting different characteristics of the urban context and urban ministry. But before moving further, it would be helpful to give a brief definition of the city. As is reflected in the title of this article, **cities are characterized by a dense and large population, an intense and complex lifestyle, a diversity of peoples, hubs of influence and migration, and specialized and segmented communities.**²

In order to holistically train evangelical missionaries for this urban context, they must be prepared in four general areas. First, missionaries must learn how to study the global urban context. Second, missionaries must be prepared to

² This simple definition is derived from the more thorough definition:

A city is a place that is characterized, *relative to the surrounding area*, by:

- A dense and large human population (Keller 2012, 135; Lees 2015, 2; Smith 2019, 12);
- Complexity and intensity in way of life and mindset (a complex ecosystem with many interrelated purposes, organizations, and processes, a fast pace of activity, multitasking, etc.) (Condon 2015, 62; Gornik 2002, 5; Greenwood 2019, 47);
- Diversity (ethnic, socioeconomic, etc.) and variety (of relationships, jobs, etc.) (Abrahamson 2014, 5-6; Smith, 2019 12; Wirth 1938, 8);
- Hubs of concentrated influence (over different sectors of society, for both good and for evil, both spreading outward from the city and attracting inward to the city) (Conn and Ortiz 2001, 233; Crane 2015, 20; Linthicum 1991, 62);
- Hubs of networks and movement (within the city, connecting with people from outside the city, facilitating migration from rural areas and across international borders) (Davis 2017, 5; Katz, Altman, and Wagner 2007, 477; Lynch 1960, 102); and
- Specialized and segmented communities (influencers, under-resourced and poor, migrants and immigrants, young people, etc.) (Davis 2017, 7; Hildreth 2014; Wirth 1938, 12-13).

personally cope with the intense pace of life in cities and remain true to the Gospel in their lives, ministries, and as they lead others. Third, missionaries must learn about the four strategic urban groups of people, including their needs, their mindsets, and potential openness to the Gospel. Finally, missionaries need to be trained in various methods of ministry that are biblical, holistic, and effective in urban contexts.

Although each area of missionary training can touch on all the characteristics of a city, I will focus on one of these key characteristics for each area of missionary preparation that follows below.

Density: Studying the Global Urban Context

Probably the most prominent characteristic of all cities, as understood in the Bible as well as through history and today, is that they have dense human populations (Keller 2012, 135; Lees 2015, 2; Smith 2019, 12). Density naturally leads to large populations as well, but it is density that makes a city a city and this density often naturally leads to the other prominent urban characteristics (intensity, diversity, influence, and specialized and segmented communities).

It is the density of the city that makes it a different and much more complex context than the countryside, and it is this density that often requires research to be understood. As mentioned earlier, the anthropological skills that missionaries are typically trained with can be helpful, but they are often not sufficient in dense urban contexts.

Therefore, at Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary, we branched out into three areas to better understand urban contexts: history, anthropology with sociology, and the particularities of the local urban context. Perhaps the second category, anthropology with sociology, could be broken down further into two or more different directions in order to develop more for global urban missionaries in the future.

Ray Bakke, one of the leading voices of the 20th and 21st centuries in global urban mission, often asserted the need to understand the history of a city or a particular urban neighborhood in order to better minister in it. Bakke himself became a leading expert on the city of Chicago. And his expertise was broad, including the history of the ethnic groups, the urban development, and the ministry that happened in that city (e.g., Bakke 1999, 27ff).

Therefore, in preparing missionaries for global urban contexts, our seminary sought to teach them an overview of the history of cities and the Christian ministry that went on within them. We've challenged students to look at specific historical examples of urban ministry (e.g., William and Catherine Booth and the Salvation Army, D.L. Moody, Toyohiko Kagawa, and Jackie Pullinger) and to glean what can be applied from their examples for urban ministry today.

Further, we offered training in urban anthropology and sociology in order to study the current urban context. Admittedly, we mainly focused on anthropology, since that is the area that most teachers of missiology know best. So, this helped students to understand culture, worldview, felt needs, and skills in cross-cultural communication and incarnational ministry. Considering our evangelical, holistic model, this teaching would generally only cover two aspects: the spiritual and the cultural.

Some training in sociology helped cover more of our model. We were able to offer some basic teaching on social structures, the domains (or sectors) of society, and demographics. Understanding these areas allows the missionary to deal with the social and perhaps economic aspects of urban contexts.

In addition, we offered some material in urban studies. First, we addressed the many forces at work in cities, including urbanization, globalization, migration, and multiculturalism. Second, we studied how urban spaces work and the movement between them (e.g., following Kevin Lynch's model (1960)). Further, we discussed the nature of urban communities and some issues of social justice. Finally, we also gave some practical exercises to our students. In one case we did a community needs assessment (following John Fuder's model in *Neighborhood Mapping* (2014)), and in another case we sent students to do a prayer walk, to look at an urban neighborhood and seek God's direction. These lessons and activities touched on all five aspects of our holistic model.³

We also guided our students to better understand the local urban context. Several groups have researched their own urban contexts, although the focus of these studies has varied widely. For example, the *Neighborhood Mapping* book described above is complemented by a guide for praying for all the neighborhoods of Chicago with some basic demographics and history of each neighborhood (Fuder with Koenig 2014). New York City was studied with a focus on all the ethnicities of the city and prayer for them

³ Some other useful tools for global urban missionaries can be found in *Tradecraft* (Crider, et al. 2013) and *Mosaic* (Looney and Bouchelle 2017).

(Clayman and Lee 2010). The twin cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul were studied with a focus on religion and doing church ministry (Mayer 2020). I am also in the process of finishing a study of Eurasian cities, including Ukraine, with a primary focus on history and understanding cities for ministry.

Thus, there are many ways to study cities today, and we must offer more of these as we train missionaries for global urban contexts. As has been demonstrated, there is much to cover in studying dense urban populations.

Intensity: Preparing Missionaries for the Complex, Fast-Paced Global Urban Environment

In addition to focusing on the context of urban ministry, it is vital to think about the missionary her/himself. What kind of training is needed to help in the personal development of missionaries and to keep them healthy and effective in global urban contexts? What will keep missionaries going in the midst of stress and failure and complex problems that seem too difficult to solve?

First, theological training is needed. This training must go beyond the basic training that most ministers receive and include some study on a biblical view of cities from both the Old and New Testaments. Key urban issues should be discussed in biblical perspective, including issues like theology of place, poverty, suffering, power, justice, and citizenship. Further, a theological vision for urban mission should be developed in order to ground the missionary both biblically and theologically (Keller 2012, 17). Missionaries in global urban contexts need to be certain of God's love for cities as well as their own personal callings to ministry there.

Next, the urban minister needs to be prepared to think critically. We found this to be very helpful in our Ukrainian context. Cities are extremely complex, and both the people and the problems of the city tend to be complex, as well. Urban ministers need to be able to problem solve and work through complicated and often changing issues. Urban ministers need to be prepared to interact with some of the smartest and most creative people in the world as well as some of the neediest and most broken people. And occasionally, they must deal with some of the evilest people in the world as well. All these kinds of people tend to be drawn to cities.

In addition, the urban minister needs to balance his/her personal life with being a ministry leader. Cities have a fast pace of life and there are often many things vying for attention at once. Not only does an urban minister need to multitask effectively, she/he needs to avoid temptation and make sure that she/he gets a sufficient amount of rest in order to live a healthy life and be an effective minister. Therefore, we like to train our students for both leadership in urban ministry and life in an urban setting together in one course.⁴

In leadership, those in urban ministry need to think about how to build and lead an effective ministry team as well as how to make good partnerships for urban ministry. Cities are so complex that it is virtually impossible to do ministry alone. As Ray Bakke reflected on effective urban ministry, he said that

It takes time, of course, and it takes city ministry partnerships that can combine the good news with good advice resources. It's bringing them together that is required, to best capture the significance of Jesus in the Gospels and the Jesus of my city nearly two thousand years later (Bakke 1997, 138).

Missionaries to the city may come as outsiders, but they can be “gifts of grace to insiders” if they can form real partnerships together (Bakke and Sharpe 2006, 143). And, missionaries in urban contexts often need to raise financial support both from partners both within and outside the community in order to pay for building projects, youth camps, soup kitchens, and other kinds of ministry. Collaboration is vitally important for successful global urban ministry, as shown by numerous ministries around the world, including Redeemer City to City (Powell and James 2019) and Movement Day (Pier 2016).

Diversity and Influence: Focusing Ministry on Strategic Urban Groups

Cities are made up of many diverse and influential groups. As mentioned above, there are four groups of urban people that appear to be particularly strategic: Influencers, the under-resourced, migrants and immigrants, and young people. Therefore, in preparing urban missionaries, we have developed a curriculum focused on these four groups.

⁴ Some helpful resources in spiritual formation/leadership are *In the Name of Jesus* (Nouwen 1989) and *Reaching Out* (Nouwen 1986); in the area of psychology, *Headspace: The Psychology of City Living* (Keedwell 2017); and in the area of urban life/leadership, *City of God, City of Satan* (Linthicum 1991) and *Encounter God in the City* (White 2006).

Of course, each of these groups have significant differences, although sometimes they can overlap. For example, a poor immigrant working multiple jobs in a Western city might be an influencer back in his/her home village/country. But, in any case, it is helpful to think about these strategic groups separately when planning for ministry.

First, in order to minister to influencers more effectively, it is vital to understand how power and systems in the city work. Furthermore, culture change needs to be considered as do the nature of change agents and how to be/find them. At my seminary in Ukraine, we invited successful Christian ministers from around the country that worked with different groups of influencers in order to inspire and challenge our students, including those working in politics/government, business, media, education, and the arts. The Redeemer City to City ministry has had some particular success in this area around the world which is worth learning from as well (Keller 2012; Keller with Alsdorf 2016).

Ministry to the under-resourced and needy must study the issues of economics, poverty, dependencies, and justice in depth. God's love for the poor and His desire for justice, as seen in both the Old and New Testaments should be addressed. Connecting this topic to the previous one might be helpful since influencers can often help solve the very problems that the under-resourced face. Incarnational, holistic ministry among the poor can be very difficult, so various models for ministry should be considered. Also, avoiding long-term dependencies is very important.⁵

Ministry to migrants and immigrants must consider issues addressed in previous training on urban studies, going into greater depth on topics like migration and multiculturalism. Sociological issues such as race, ethnicity, and religion should be explored as well. As urban areas attract people from many different ethnicities and religions, many of those people come to the city with a greater openness to new ideas and new religion even as the forces of secularism begin to work. Missionaries have opportunities to share the Gospel themselves through different kinds of holistic ministry and religious dialogue in addition to collaborating with established urban churches (that might not easily be able to bridge cultural or language barriers) to facilitate greater amounts of ministry to immigrants.⁶

Finally, ministry to young people must consider both poor and influencer youth. Their needs and interests may vary, but many young urban people are affected by

⁵ A highly recommended book about ministry among the under-resourced is *Companion to the Poor* (Grigg 2013).

⁶ One good source on ministry to urban migrants and immigrants is *Crossroads of the Nations* (Looney 2015).

secularism and connected by consumerism, entertainment, and technology (Greenwood, 2019, 18). We must learn how to speak the language of the younger generation and use the means through which they often speak (texting, social media, etc.).

Each of these diverse groups have significant needs and influence in global urban contexts. The better that we understand each of these groups, the more effective we can be in doing ministry among them. However, we need to consider one more area of training: what kind of methods should we use to do ministry in the city?

Community: Methods for Biblical, Holistic Ministry among Global Urban Communities

Cities are characterized by specialized and segmented communities. Some of those specializations and segments were described and considered for ministry above. In order to have a strong holistic ministry within these communities, meaningful relationships need to be built, and that will likely only be possible after spending time and energy learning about the community's culture and language, as appropriate (Bakke and Sharpe 2006, 153).

Considering the needs of the under-resourced, migrant, and immigrant communities, two methods of ministry are often effective in urban settings. First, is the method of community organizing. Second, is establishing a community center. Let's unpack each of these methods and analyze their strengths and weaknesses.

Community organizing has a bad reputation among some Christians because it has a history of being promoted by secular groups. However, community organizing can be a great way to start caring for and investing in a community which can build bridges for evangelism and faith.

In poorer urban communities, unhealthy habits of despair over problems and dependence on others can lead to a poverty not just of economics, but of spirit as well. The missionary task in community organizing is to help people in the community to voice their largest concerns (not imposing what the missionary thinks are the biggest problems) and facilitating them to work together to deal with them (not bringing in lots of help from the outside). Successful organizing can not only solve community problems, but it can also break bad habits of dependency and truly change people. And, as people understand that real changes are taking place in themselves and in their

neighborhoods, it is natural to thank the missionary and ask why he/she is helping. Community organizing is a holistic ministry that can address many issues and lead many people to Christian faith and into growing churches (Linthicum 2005).

We like to share examples of community organizing with our students from David and Sally Mann, Baptist pastors ministering in a poor, diverse area of East London. Along with their church renewal and planting ministry, they helped facilitate the clearing of a large field in the city, gathering people from all over the neighborhood and getting the government to haul away the trash collected. By doing this, they eliminated a place where many young people did drugs and created a place where young people could play football instead. In another instance, the biggest need of the community was a good school, so they established a Christian private school, raised money to purchase a building, and got the community involved in renovating the building so that the school could be opened. This new school provided a good education with Christian teaching and values. Both these community organizing projects provided holistic ministry to the local community.

A second method to consider for urban contexts is establishing a community center. A community center can help provide a variety of services for those in need and can be established in locations with the goal of serving a certain population (e.g., immigrants or the under-resourced). A community center provides another kind of holistic ministry, as it is tailored to the needs of the community. It could include things like a coffee shop (to attract young adults), offer activities for youth, offer inexpensive (or free) clothing, have a soup kitchen (for the under-resourced), and/or offer language lessons or legal advice (for immigrants just settling in the city). Of course, all these activities cost money, so some kind of outside financial support may be necessary to start such a ministry (in contrast to community organizing).

One good example of a community center ministry is the “M2M Network” that WorldVenture supports. M2M stands for “Málaga to Malmo,” signifying a network of European cities in which they have or would like to start community centers in order to minister to the diaspora of unreached immigrants moving into them. This ministry is steadily growing as community centers are established in different cities.

Both these ministries focused on the community can partner with or lead into urban church planting. Urban church planting can be started independently from other ministries as well. A number of themes that have been previously discussed come together in the planting of churches in urban contexts.

First, urban church planting must be focused on the community and not on “outreach,” which can set up an “us versus them” mentality. The church needs to be part of the community, both suffering with it and succeeding with it. Remembering the words of Jeremiah 29:4-7, as the city is blessed, so will God’s people be blessed. Christian missionaries must join with the people they are sent to, in order to understand them better, love them better, and seek God’s blessings, His “shalom,” together (Brooks 2018, 127-128).

Second, building a team for ministry and forming partnerships with other churches, ministries, and organizations are critical for new urban churches. Most of these team members and partners should come from within the community. Urban churches need to contextualize to their environment, which includes its meeting place, meeting time, and ministries in the community. For example, perhaps no building can be afforded, so the church will need to meet in rental space or in homes. Due to the busyness of congregants, maybe small groups need to meet at unusual times (I once heard of a small group of businessmen that decided to meet at 1AM since it was the only time that they were all available).

Another important part of building teams and establishing partnerships is sharing vision. This is the responsibility of the leadership, but vision needs to be shared in such a way that it can be adjusted to the needs of the community and sometimes challenged by both those within and from outside the community.

Furthermore, conflict resolution skills are very important in urban church planting. These can both help resolve problems within the team and partnerships as well as to reduce problems with government institutions and other powerful organizations. Establishing good relationships in the community that can be built upon is vitally important for urban church planting.⁷

There certainly are many more kinds of effective methods for urban ministries, and I would personally like to develop or find some good examples of methods using technology in urban contexts. This is an area to develop in the future, especially as global urban missionary work expands and encounters different needs and opportunities.

⁷ One good resource for urban leadership and church planting (and many other topics on urban ministry) is *Urban Ministry* (Conn and Ortiz 2001).

Some Practical Lessons that God Gave Along the Way

As we developed our curriculum to prepare missionaries for urban contexts at Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary, we were able to set up coursework for two years of part-time study plus independent work. We invited teachers from abroad with doctorates and significant ministry expertise. Of course, these international teachers spoke English and needed to be translated.

Yet, there were a number of factors at work that were beyond our control. Looking back, it seems clear that God was at work, so I'd like to share some of the lessons that we learned. To make these lessons a bit more memorable, I'd like to share these insights again following the major characteristics of cities.

Density: Less and more than we hoped for

One drawback of our program in Ukraine was that, so far, we have not recruited as many students as we hoped to. New programs typically struggle with recruitment during their first years, and then COVID came two years after the program started followed by the current full-scale war in Ukraine two more years after that. These latter problems led to us moving to hybrid instruction, with some teachers and some students connecting online through Zoom instead of in person.

Making instruction available by Zoom pushed teachers and students farther apart, but it also allowed us to invite several teachers that would not have been able to travel to Ukraine otherwise. That made our training more interesting and deeper at several points. And since most of our teachers were being translated from English and instruction was offered on Zoom, we were able to invite four English-speaking students from Africa to take our classes as well (through a partnership with Movement Day). Thus, both teachers and students that we would have never expected were able to join our training.

Intensity: Many lectures and on-site visits for a small number of students

We were able to follow our typical part-time class structure, offering two two-week modules of instruction each year for two years, four modules total. During these modules, the instruction is typically intense (from 9AM to 5PM), but since we had a small number of students, our class time was even more intense than usual for each student.

Our small number of students allowed them to have more personal interaction with the teachers and between the students themselves. So, although fewer students were trained overall, the experiences were richer and allowed for more individual mentoring.

In addition, we tried (as much as COVID and the war allowed) to take students to on-site ministry visits to meet urban ministers and learn about their ministries. These visits helped students experience what had been taught in a more tangible way.

Diversity and Influence: Different countries, different languages, influential ministries

We never expected to have the diversity in our program that we've had over these past few years. We've had teachers from Australia, England, the Netherlands, Scotland, the US, and Ukraine. We've had students from Ukraine, the US, Ghana, and Kenya. And, due to these differences, we've had to translate our teaching and discussions into Ukrainian, Russian, and English.

Our teachers have had influential ministries all over the world – on the continents of North America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia. We had numerous guest teachers from Ukraine who shared about their urban ministries as well. Furthermore, our students have included pastors and missionaries working in influential ministries themselves.

This combination of diversity and influence proved to be a great blessing. It was especially interesting to note that our Ukrainian and African students loved studying with each other, despite having to wait for translation, and they did not want to take courses separately when given the chance. Having diverse, mature voices sharing with one another was a great addition to our training that we could not have arranged without God's help.

Community: Connecting in person, connecting online

Due to COVID and the war, our students were separated from their teachers and each other much more than we expected. However, there were two good sides of this problem. First, when the students were finally able to get together on our campus with one of our teachers during a class, it was a tremendous blessing that made the teaching time more fruitful.

Second, we realized that we could use the technology of Zoom to connect more regularly than just during our official class time. So, we made it optional (but encouraged) to connect for a Zoom meeting once every one or two months. This allowed us to take questions from students, encourage them to do their assignments, and pray for one another, which was especially important in times of war. In this way, we developed a small but strong community among our students, something that they can hopefully take into their current and future ministry.

Conclusion

We have taken some first steps into training missionaries for global urban contexts. Certainly, more methods can be tried, and the focus of training narrowed for specific needs. In any case, I believe that we have established a basic framework for training that can be used for preparing missionaries for the growing urban mission field.

It may not be possible in every case, but we realized that the diversity of our teachers and students really helped our students see a lot of perspectives and begin to practice interacting with people that were different from them. Both these activities are very valuable for future ministry in global urban contexts.

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Abstract

Peter's readers were exiles facing accusations and slander. As a response to these negative declarations, Peter exhorted them toward positive, life-giving verbal proclamation. He reminded his readers of *past* proclamation by Jesus, the prophets, and those who preached the Gospel to them. The verbal proclamation by Peter's readers was to include the declaration of "the praises" (2:9) of God, blessing and keeping the "tongue from evil" (3:9, 10), giving a coherent defense of the Christian faith (3:15), as well as "speaking the very words of God" (4:11). Word and Mission then, are connected in positive verbal proclamation. The chapter concludes with a brief case study concerning dialogue with the Muslim world.

Introduction

Peter's readers were suffering "grief in all kinds of trials" (1 Pet 1:6). These trials included accusations, insults and slander. Peter, then, gave them several ways to respond. They were to live holy lives (1:14–17; 2:11–12), know their identity as born-again chosen ones (1:1–3; 23; 2:9–10); realize the action of God on their behalf (1:3–5; 18–21); commit themselves to God (4:19); and stand firm in the grace of God (5:12). In this article, however, I would like to point out another response: positive, verbal proclamation. In other words, Peter encourages life-giving, affirmative words amid insulting slander and negative accusations. To motivate his readers to positive proclamation, he highlights *past* proclamation, seen most prominently in the lives of Jesus, the prophets, and those who preached the Gospel to his readers. It is in this way that Word and Mission are connected in 1 Peter.

Theology “from below”

At the outset of this “academic” article, we need to be reminded of the context of many of our fellow believers. Although those of us in academia have the joy of spending hours reading, pondering and writing on the deep things of God, many of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ do not share this same privilege. Consequently, we need to have in mind the perspective of theology “from below,” as well as to appreciate a study of the Bible as an “ordinary reader” who lacks formal theological training (Musa 2020, 36; cf. Akper 2005, 1–13). As Hassan Musa writes, “[t]he perspectives of these readers need to be heard. They show us where God’s word is needed in the lives of people and reminds us of how God in Jesus lived with people in their contexts” (2020, 36). While we should always strive for “solid food” (Heb 5:12–6:1), as well as to “teach ... sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1),¹ we should also acknowledge the reality and context of the “ordinary reader” of the Bible. In other words, while there are circumstances that call for a deep, intellectually challenging treatise (that we might title a “Book of Hebrews type of exposition”), other times we need to enter the real-world context of many of our fellow believers. We might title this a “1 John type of personal engagement.” This article seeks to encourage all readers, irrespective of their educational background, toward verbal proclamation.

Life as Exiles

It appears that Peter did not personally know his readers. Even though he called them “dear friends” (2:11; 4:12), he did not call anyone by name, and “his knowledge of their situation does not seem specific enough to have come from being present with them” (Jobes 2005, 43). He described them as scattered “exiles” (1:1). As such, they would have felt “isolated and insignificant” (Muriithi 2006, 1544), and would have experienced the stigma of being identified as refugees (see Nijukuri 2020, 245–246).² Interestingly, “the entire book of 1 Peter is both framed (1:1; cf. 5:13) and saturated with the terms of exile and foreignness ... [and it is] the only NT book to use the motif of foreignness to explain the life of the Christian with respect to society” (Jobes 2005, 39). Indeed, there is the possibility that Peter’s readers had experienced expulsion from Rome and were forced to immigrate a long distance to the east: to “Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and

¹ Throughout this article, I will be citing from NIV (1984 translation), unless otherwise noted.

² Of course, Scripture is full of accounts of those who were forced to move from their homes to settle in other places. Examples include Abraham, those deported to Assyria and Babylon, and many early Christians (see Adedibu 2020, 231).

Bithynia” (1:1) (Jobes, 2005, 37–41). We would be remiss if we did not note that many today are experiencing similar alienation through forced immigration, war, ethnic conflicts, and natural disasters (Adedibu 2020, 231).³

First-century believers often lived as outcasts and outsiders. They were viewed as a threat to social order, and were at times savagely slandered (Campbell 1998, 29). Craig Keener writes that Romans viewed Christians “as ‘atheists’ (like some philosophers, for rejecting the gods), ‘cannibals’ (for claiming to eat Jesus’ ‘body’ and drink his ‘blood’) and incestuous (for statements like ‘I love you, brother,’ or ‘I love you, sister’)” (2014, 685).

Believers today in some Asian contexts also face opposition: “ancestral worship and domestic cults are common in individual households, and ... participation in various folk religions is just part of the social norms. Christians failing to participate in these ancestral rites and common cultic practices can similarly result in social rebukes for being stubborn, exclusivist and even impious toward the ancestors” (Wai-Lan Sun 2016, 257). K. K. Yeo writes of theory and practice being inseparable in Asian biblical interpretation, with Asian believers living a very public faith. As they live out this life in the midst of a pluralistic society, many are confronted with sociopolitical alienation (2017, 328). Many other cultural contexts around the world exhibit these same tendencies. Thus, Peter’s words to the “exiles” of the first century hold acute relevance for many today.

Paraenesis and Proclamation

To appreciate how Peter “speaks” to the scattered exiles, we will briefly focus on the actions of Paul. In a time of potential crisis—before their shipwreck on Malta—Paul sternly warned and admonished the soldiers on board the ship. We note two instances of an interesting verb: παρήνει ὁ Παῦλος (*parenei ho Paulos*) (Acts 27:9); νῦν παραινώ ὑμᾶς (*nun paraino humas*) (Acts 27:22). The former phrase is translated as “Paul warned them” (NIV; “began to admonish them”: NASB; “advised them”: ESV), and the latter as “now I urge you” (NIV, NASB, ESV). The lexical form of the verb is παραινέω (*paraineō*)

³ Today’s church needs to be consistently reminded to affirm the human dignity of these immigrants, show solidarity with them, and meet their spiritual needs (see Niyukuri 2020, 252–254). For the perspective of an “exile mentality” of Peter’s readers, seen with the “spiritual house”/ “temple” of 1 Pet 2:5, see Mbuvi 2007. He writes that the cultic language (“sacrifices,” “priesthood,” and “spiritual house” also translated “temple of the Spirit” in v. 5) emphasizes the identity of the exiles in *spiritual* terms. “Cultic language thus provides the vehicle to communicate the active presence of God in the midst of the Christian community’s struggles with ostracization, persecution and self-identity” (2007, 5). Although I am not denying a spiritual aspect to Peter’s use of the term “exile,” I am assuming that Peter’s readers were physically forced to move to a new location.

and can mean “to advise strongly, recommend, urge” (Bauer 2000, 764). Thus, Paul was warning and exhorting the soldiers in Acts 27. From this verb we get the word *paraenesis*.

Paraenesis is a particular genre of literature. It is characterized by moral exhortation and encouragement toward a certain action. While we see the paraenetic tradition in nearly every New Testament epistle, it is “perhaps most richly on display in the General Epistles” (Charles 2006, 287). Rather than complex doctrinal treatises (seen in Romans or Galatians for example), letters like 1 Peter are characterized more for exhortations and encouragement. Thus, 1 Peter “displays characteristics of paraenetic as its specific literary genre” (Campbell 1998, 20). Also, “[l]ike Greco-Roman paraenesis, 1 Peter evidences an emphasis on ethical instructions that direct and encourage moral action” (de Waal Dryden 2006, 7). Doctrine is still discussed in paraenetic literature but is firmly connected to exhortation and is meant to be applied to the daily life of the believer (Pérez Millos 2018, 48).⁴ One aspect of paraenesis is the comparison of negative and positive behavior. Authors will challenge their readers *toward* the positive and *away from* the negative. This aspect is prominent in 1 Peter (Charles 2006, 287, n46). What follows, then, is an example of this “positive”/ “negative,” paraenetic tradition of 1 Peter, seen specifically in the topic of verbal proclamation.⁵

There are three aspects of verbal proclamation in 1 Peter. First, there are *negative* declarations: accusations (2:12); ignorant talk (2:15); “everyone who asks you” (3:15);⁶ malicious words (3:16); slander (3:16); abuse (4:4) and insults (4:14).⁷ A result of these negative declarations was that “[s]lander and malicious talk undermined their relationships with associates and family, threatened their honor in the community, and possibly jeopardized their livelihood” (Jobes 2005, 58). Second, there is *positive* proclamation *in the past* by prophets (1:10, 12); Jesus (2:22, 23; 3:19; 4:6); the God who “calls” (1:15; 2:9, 21; 3:9; 5:10); the Spirit (1:11, 12); and those who preached the

⁴ Peter uses a similar verb (“encouraging you”) in 5:12: παρακαλῶν (*parakalon*) which also means to “encourage, exhort” (Bauer 2000, 765).

⁵ While I will not be using formal aspects of the methodology known as rhetorical criticism, I will be taking advantage of general insights from this field. One insight focuses on an investigation into how an author attempts to address and then persuade his or her audience given their situation. Another insight shows an appreciation for the communicative force of texts and highlights the “art of persuasion” by the author, who often is attempting to put the hearer into a certain frame of mind. Such an author appeals to the mind as well as the heart (see Möller 2005, 689–692).

⁶ There is nothing in the grammar or word meanings that would suggest negativity here. However, acknowledging *the historical situation* of exiles being harassed and accused, we can surmise that non-believers were not genuinely asking nor humbling seeking answers. The fact that Peter encourages his readers (in the same verse) to answer “gently” and “with respect” corroborates this idea of some sort of negativity in the questions from the non-believers.

⁷ See also “threats” (3:14, NIV 2011), also translated as “intimidation” (3:14, NASB), as well as 2:4: “rejected by humans.”

Gospel to Peter's readers (1:12, 25; cf. the "word" or "message" of 2:8 and "the gospel of God" in 4:17).⁸ The "word of the Lord" in 1:25 is central to this idea of a past proclamation. Previously, Peter wrote of the *new birth* by the word of God that created the people of God (1:23; also 1:3). He then writes: "this is the word that was preached

to you" (1:25). Here we note the first hint of a connection between Word and Mission—the Word was preached, and a people were formed (thus, Mission completed). The third aspect of verbal proclamation in 1 Peter is the encouragement *to continue* this positive proclamation (2:9; 3:9, 10, 15; 4:9, 11). In the context of past, life-giving proclamation, then, the missionary strategy of positive declarations—seen paradigmatically in the "word of the Lord" (1:25)—will be explored as a response to the negative accusations that Peter's readers were experiencing. Peter, in this paraenetic letter, seeks to morally exhort his readers to verbally proclaim God's message amid dark and negative slander and accusation. In what follows, we will discuss the content of the positive proclamation seen in 1 Peter 2:9; 3:9, 10, 15; 4:9 and 11.

Continued Proclamation: "Declare the praises" (2:9)

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2:9).

Mission is a consequence of our identity. This identity was formed because of the Word. The new birth, through the Word (1:23–25), formed believers into a chosen people (2:9). These believers were then given the task of "declaring the praises" (2:9) of God. Thus, the Word births Mission. The Word leads to Mission. The Divine Word grants rebels and sinners a new identity and calls them to the task of announcing to a dark world the wonder of living in the light. Yet, even in this passage on *our* identity, Peter reminds his readers that the focus is to remain on God. This is important given our propensity to self-absorption and egotism. The work of salvation is *from God* (see also Ps 3:8; Jon 2:9); specifically worded in 2:9 as he who "called [us] out of darkness into his wonderful light." The Triune God always does something *for his people* before asking of *his people* (McConnell 2006, 330). God first establishes our identity, and then calls us to his mission. This is done through his Word.

⁸ Another example of this "past" proclamation is Peter himself, since his purpose was to "encourage" and "testify" (5:12).

Specifically, our identity is described as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (2:9). These phrases are rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures.⁹ Peter connects the NT church with the people of God from the old covenant and is “giving his readers a distinctive identity that is bound up tightly with God’s mercy to them in Christ Jesus, and with their response in obedient faith and holiness” (Carson 2007, 1032). This response takes the form of proclamation (2:9) and holy lives (2:11–12). By knowing our identity, “the church will have authority to speak with a prophetic voice and be an instrument for peace and reconciliation” (Jusu 2016, 1857).

The crucial phrase for our purposes is “declare the praises” (NIV); “proclaim the excellencies” (NASB; ESV). The Greek verb translated “declare”/ “proclaim” is ἐξαγγέλλω (*exaggellō*) and appears only here in the NT. It means to “show forth” or “to make known by praising or proclaiming” (Strong 1995, #1804). Another source sees its similarity to the different (and common) Greek verb ἀναγγέλλω (*anaggellō*)¹⁰ to emphasize the presence of the preposition ἐξ/ἐκ (*ex/ek*) at the beginning of the verb that “gives the sense of publishing *forth*” (Alford 1976, 348). Thus, we were birthed by the Word of God; we have become the people of God; and we proclaim *outward* this reality to the nations. When we realize what our God has done, and ponder the darkness that previously encased us, we will participate in mission.

What exactly are we to declare? We are to proclaim God’s “praises” or “excellencies” (ἄρετὰς, *aretas*). After the return from exile in Babylon, the people of God were “to declare τὰς ἀρετὰς (*tas aretas*, the mighty acts, praises) of God (Isa 43:20–21 LXX) ... The word *aretē* was used to refer to the excellent character of one who is worthy of praise” (Jobes 2005, 163). Knowing our identity—as well as the identity of our God (his goodness and excellence), we go forth in mission.

However, there are some who see this “declaration” more in the sense of worship (and not necessarily missional activity) (Michaels 1998, 110–111). Others imply a dual purpose to our declaration: “The two interwoven functions of the church are to offer worship to God and to witness to others” (Muriithi 2006, 1543). Another author points out the biblical connection between worship and mission with the “the hymn-singing Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail (Acts 16:25; cf. 1 Pet 2:9)” (Wright 2006, 133). Thus, “it is more likely that this word [“declare”] should be seen along with the other instances of evangelism in 1 Peter (1:12, 25; 3:1; 4:17)” (McKnight 1996, 110).

⁹ See Exod 19:5–6; Deut 7:6; 10:15; 1 Sam 12:22; Isa 62:12; for the mention of a “people of God” in 1 Pet 2:10, see Hos 1:9, 10; 2:23.

¹⁰ Seen e.g., in 1 Pet 1:12 and translated as “told” (NIV) or “announce” (NASB).

Nonetheless, given the presence of “live such good lives” in 2:11–12, it may be more accurate to say that the dual purpose of the people of God revolves around evangelization and holy living—which would include worship. Wright comments: “the mission of the church, according to Peter, includes both verbal proclamation and ethical living, and the impact of his tight argument is that *both* are utterly essential” (2006, 390). The verse of 1 Peter 2:9 demonstrates that mission is birthed from identity (that was given through the Word): “If this is what you are (your identity, through election, redemption and covenant)”; “then this is how you must live (your ethics)”; “and this is what will result among the nations (your mission)” (Wright 2006, 389).

Continued Proclamation: “Bless”; “Keep tongue from evil” (3:9, 10)

“Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, ‘Whoever would love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from deceitful speech’” (1 Pet 3:9–10).

After the mention of “declaring the praises” in 2:9, the next example of positive, continued proclamation is found in 3:9 and 10. Peter calls his readers to respond “with blessing,” “which literally means ‘to speak well [of someone]’ ... The word occurs over four hundred times in the [Greek OT] often in opposition to cursing” (Blum 1981, 238).¹¹ Other uses of the verb “to bless” clearly denote verbal proclamation and not just an attitude or an action of grace: see Matt 14:19; 26:26; Mark 6:41; 14:22; Luke 24:30; 1 Cor 14:16. As he cites Psalm 34 in v. 10, “Peter reminds them that there is nothing new about this command” to bless and not curse (Muriithi 2006, 1547). Yet, again, Peter does not want his readers to begin and end with verbal proclamation. A holy life is to be reflected as well: these verses are in the context (from 2:11–4:11) of Peter calling his readers to “live godly lives” (Jobes 2005, 165). We would be remiss if we did not point out that some of Peter’s admonitions reflect the words of Jesus, especially with this positive proclamation of “blessing” (e.g., 1 Pet 3:9 with Luke 6:28) (Seng Ja 2022, 482–483). Peter has already reminded his readers of Jesus in 2:23. Jobes comments: “the example of Jesus’ refusal to retaliate for unjust accusations broke the vicious cycle of escalating conflict that is so familiar within communities” (2005, 217).

This admonition by Peter to bless is even more striking given the historical-cultural context of Peter’s readers. They lived in a culture of “honor and shame,” where insults, verbal abuse and defamation of character were “weapons typically employed ... for

¹¹ One of the best examples is seen in 1 Cor 4:12: “When we are cursed, we bless.”

challenging the honor of others and *publicly shaming and discrediting* those who [were] different or regarded as one's competitors" (Bruce Malina, in Jobes 2005, 216–217, emphasis added). In the face of a public shaming, a Christian would experience dishonor if they did not respond properly (Campbell 1998, 27). Thus, Peter's instructions of nonretaliation would have been startling. He calls them to bless and refrain from verbal retaliation (Jobes 2005, 217). When someone curses us, the natural inclination is to respond in like manner. Peter calls his readers *not only to resist the temptation to retaliate*, but to "return blessing for evil and insult" (Jobes 2005, 218). We are to bless, and to keep our tongues from evil and our lips from deceitful speech.

Continued Proclamation: "Give an answer" (3:15)

"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Pet 3:15).

An implication of Peter's words in 3:15 is that believers need to know the preached Word (1:25) —to defend it and explain it coherently and adequately. Jusu comments: "We must be so well instructed in the knowledge of our faith that whenever anyone asks us about it, we may be able to give a proper answer" (2016, 1859). For Peter's readers, they were to "set apart Christ as Lord." In other words, instead of a life full of angst and frustration (especially considering the accusations and slander they were facing), Christ had to be "placed in a special and preferred place" (McConnell 2006, 343). Furthermore, knowing the identity of Christ, who is "Lord," is a prerequisite for *positive* verbal proclamation. We are to have "a mind-set rooted in Christ's uncontested lordship" (Charles 2006, 335). This must be done with "gentleness and respect": "The dignified respectfulness of their speech should stand in clear contrast to the malicious slander of those who attack them (3:16)" (Muriithi 2006, 1547). The goal is not necessarily to win a debate—but to win a soul (McConnell 2006, 345). With the phrase in v. 16 of non-believers "speaking maliciously," we conclude that when "non-Christians slander believers the statement of the truth ["giving an answer"] may shame them into silence" (Blum 1981, 240).¹²

We are reminded that Christians in Peter's time were exiles and strangers in their new lands. However, "[c]ultural isolation is not to be the route taken by the Christian community. It is to live its life openly in the midst of the unbelieving world, and just as

¹² The wording used by Peter here is further proof of their "honor and shame" culture.

openly to be prepared to explain the reasons for it” (Paul Achtemeier, in Jobes 2005, 230). The call to verbal proclamation by “giving an answer” raises the issue of Christians today and their ability to defend the faith in a way that makes sense to those outside the church. We should avoid the use of jargon and be cognizant of Christian vocabulary that remains opaque for non-believers (Jobes 2005, 230–231). When we “give an answer,” it needs to be with deep knowledge of the Word and with cultural sensitivity.

Continued Proclamation: “Don’t grumble” (4:9)

“Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling” (1 Pet 4:9).

Peter gives his readers an urgent reminder of the return of Christ in 4:7. This crucial doctrine is also mentioned in 1:5, 7; 4:13, 17 and 5:1, 10. In light of his return, it is not enough to *do* good—we must also have a proper attitude—one that does not result in negative grumbling (McConnell 2006, 354). When we offer hospitality to others, we must not grumble because of the inconvenience such hospitality often entails (Charles 2006, 347). Peter’s readers would have been expected to offer hospitality to other members within community of believers, on account of similar expressions in the same context—“for one another” (4:8) and “serve one another” (4:10). Given their alienation and ostracization, Peter is encouraging them to provide a physical refuge for each other, without complaining or grumbling: “The church is to be that alternate society where Christians find a place when shunned by unbelievers who live by different values” (Jobes 2005, 281). It is surprising that Peter is concerned even with our “under the breath” grumblings and complaints. We are called to positive, verbal proclamation even in the “minor” areas of life.

Continued Proclamation: “Speaking the very words of God” (4:11)

“If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God” (1 Pet 4:11).

This passage alerts us to the seriousness of the topic of verbal proclamation for Peter. For his readers, “[e]verything they say (whether in preaching or in daily life) should be the sort of thing that God would say” (Muriithi 2006, 1548). In other words, “what one says is to be as God says it,” for “‘The very words of God’ translates *logia* or ‘oracles,’ which are utterances from God’s mouth” (Blum 1981, 247). This is a weighty, profound verse. Even though the verb used for “speaking” is common and “covers all forms of oral service—teaching, preaching, prophecy, perhaps even tongues” (Blum 1981, 247), Peter’s calls his readers to consider all their speech as God’s words.

Peter wants his readers to deliver the Word of God and not their opinions or speculations. They were to place the Word before their fellow believers and before the nations. For those involved in preaching/teaching/evangelizing, what is envisioned was not a matter of

...informal discussions, nor of reflections, nor of vain talk (see 2 Tim 2:14, 16), but of proclaiming doctrine from God himself that He has revealed in his Word, and that the Apostle Paul calls “the good deposit” (2 Tim 1:14). The church is not to be entertained but to be instructed. Some preachers consider that the congregation should leave the meeting place having *enjoyed* themselves, so stories, jokes, jocularities and the like are intermingled in the sermon, which entertain the listeners, but do not edify them (Pérez Millos 2018, 345–346).

Peter was not just exhorting preachers, however. The words of 4:11 were not addressed to the “leaders,” like we see in the next chapter (5:1–4). The focus here is on “each one” (v. 10a). That is, each believer was to use their gift to speak (v. 11); to serve (v. 10); to love (v. 8); and to offer hospitality to others (v. 9) (Elliott 2000, 758). When the people of God speak and serve (4:9–10), they are to leave behind the self-absorption that can so easily hinder, “so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen” (4:11). As Muriithi writes: “Excited again about the glory of God and what he has called us to, Peter finishes his list with a resounding *Amen*, a wholehearted endorsement of what he has been saying” (2006, 1549). Peter’s own proclamation ends with giving glory to God.

Case Study: Christians and Muslims and Continued Proclamation

We have seen numerous examples of verbal proclamation in the book of 1 Peter. This is one way that Word and Mission are seen together. A contemporary need in this area centers on our dialogue with Muslims. As Christians, we should be known for declaring the praises of the Triune God. We should seek to bless individual Muslims; to prepare ourselves to give a contextually appropriate answer with vocabulary that Muslims will understand; and to focus on the proclamation of God’s infallible Word. This is urgent given the number of adherents of the Muslim faith, estimated at over 1 billion people (Kamau 2018, 167). Those ministering in this area encourage us to go beyond accusation and focus on basic principles that both Christianity and Islam have in common (Kamau 2018, 178). It would be helpful for Christians to learn how Muslims approach dialogue:

...the Qur'an warns Muslims not to insult non-Muslims, otherwise they will insult Allah (6:108). On the same note, generally the Qur'an advises Muslims that in dialogue they should engage people of the book [Jews and Christians] in a peaceful manner devoid of anger or intimidation. They should not be emotional or ask or answer questions out of disrespect (2:62; 48:29; 3:64–65; 5:82) (Kamau 2018, 178).

Obviously, we as Christians could follow these words. In addition, an aspect of our Christian faith “requires many painstaking efforts to understand ‘the other’” (Chul-Soo Kim 2009, 235). One practical way to understand the Muslim world would be with formal, interfaith conferences (Kamau 2018, 182). However, with a reminder of the “ordinary reader” that we mentioned at the outset, our dialogue should be done in a such a way that members of each faith will be able to grasp the content (Kamau 2018, 183). We know that challenging theological concepts such as the Trinity or monotheism can be easily misunderstood. Thus, an organized plan of study of both religions should be arranged with the goal of avoiding simplistic generalizations (Kamau 2018, 183–184). Other practical suggestions include “offering help, visiting one another, giving invitations to eat in one’s home, and sharing free time” (Kamau 2018, 183). All of these suggestions would include verbal proclamation.

In the past, there have been “unfortunate relationships between the Christian West and the Muslim world” (Chul-Soo Kim 2009, 227). Some observers note that many Westerners have not had a positive view of the Muslim world. Indeed, some western intellectual approaches zealously sought to prove Islam wrong. However, there should be an attitude of dialogue and “giving an answer” gently and with respect (1 Pet 3:15). Therefore, those from the West should consider how to support Majority World missionaries in this endeavor. One advantage is that Majority World believers often share common cultural features with Muslims, as well as a shared awareness of the spirit world (2009, 234, 236, 239–240). In sum, Chul-Soo Kim exhorts all Christians to avoid viewing Muslims as “dangerous, menacing, or threatening,” and to realize the “deep-seated agony” of Muslims—their “rejection, abandonment, humiliation, and frustration” (2009, 233).¹³

¹³ For Chul-Soo Kim’s defense of the agony of Muslims, see Chul-Soo Kim 2009, 230–233, where he writes of Muhammed being rejected for his monotheistic belief—first by his own people, then by others, and especially by People of the Book (Jews and Christians).

Conclusion

One aspect of the suffering of Peter's readers came in the form of accusations, malicious talk, slander and insults. However, Peter reminds his readers of past proclamation to encourage them *to respond to these accusations positively and verbally*. Specifically, they were to "declare the praises" of God, bless others, keep their tongues from evil, give a coherent defense of the Christian faith, avoid grumbling, and speak "as one speaking the very words of God." Word and Mission are intricately connected in 1 Peter. The Word gives birth to new life in believers, and from this new identity these believers, as the people of God, go forth in Mission—with verbal proclamation. My goal in this article has been to highlight how Word and Mission are connected in the positive verbal proclamation of the Gospel by believers, as one of Peter's responses to the accusations and insults that his readers were facing. May we know and declare the Word of God—all for his glory (1 Pet 4:11).

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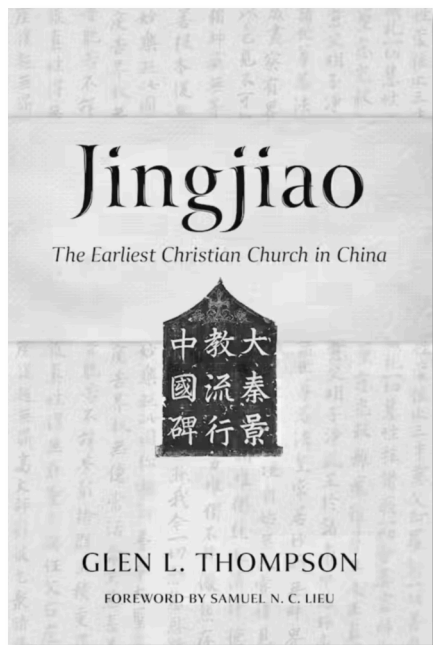
REVIEW: *Jingjiao: The Earliest Christian Church in China* By Glen L. Thompson



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EDWARD L.
SMITHER

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\$29.99 paperback.



In this work, Glen Thompson aims to capture the history of the Church of the East (Jingjiao or the “luminous religion of Syria”) in China. Thompson, a New Testament and Patristics scholar and retired professor from Wisconsin Lutheran College and Asian Lutheran Seminary (Honk Kong), has also written *The Correspondence of Pope Julius I* (2015) and *In This Way We Came to Rome* (2024). In *Jingjiao*, Thompson explores Syriac and Chinese texts (both written and archaeological) to make sense of this phenomenal church movement that endured under Chinese, Mongol, and Muslim rule from the seventh to fourteenth centuries.

Following a brief introduction, in chapter 1, Thompson lays out the Church of the East’s history from the second to sixth centuries, focusing on its developments in Syria and Persia and its initial expansion through Central Asia. In chapter 2, the author thoroughly discusses the famous Stele from Chang’an—a stone monument discovered near X’ian in 1623 that told the story of the early Church of the East mission to China. In chapter 3, Thompson narrates the initial mission work of Alopen (AD 635) and the growth of the Jingjiao in the seventh and eighth centuries. In chapter 4, he surveys new evidence discovered in the nineteenth century—additional stone monuments and Jingjiao documents. In the next chapter, Thompson builds on this evidence and strives to make sense of Jingjiao theology and beliefs. In chapter 6, he narrates the development of the church,

particularly its leadership structures, under the Tang dynasty. In chapter 7, Thompson discusses the continued journey of the Chinese church under various Chinese dynasties as well as Mongol and Muslim rule through the fourteenth century. In a brief epilogue, Thompson discusses the significance of reflecting on Chinese Christianity before the periods of European colonialism, the Protestant Reformation in Europe, or the modern Catholic and Protestant missionary efforts in China. Finally, the work includes helpful appendices with maps, images, and charts clarifying Jingjiao texts.

Thompson has done a great job presenting a fresh overview of pre-modern, Chinese Christianity. With few people in the world qualified to engage both Syriac and Chinese texts to tell the Church of the East and Jingjiao story, Thompson has carefully worked through the evidence to do just that. Building on the textual evidence, Thompson nicely describes the main themes of Jingjiao teaching and theology. While the theological vocabulary and images are quite contextual to the Chinese Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist setting, Thompson shows that Jingjiao theology coheres with the rule of faith—the summary of the gospel captured in the historic creeds. Chinese Christianity is both Chinese and Christian.

While I largely appreciated the book, I have just a couple of critiques. First, perhaps due to the nature of the book (history, evidence, theological reflection), there is a good bit of repetition that could probably have been edited back some. Second, when discussing Alopen's journey to China, Thompson seems to indicate that Alopen was not sent as a missionary but rather as a requested bishop for an already existing Christian community resident in China (pp. 55-57). This is an interesting theory consistent with how bishops were appointed in the early church; however, Thompson fails to provide compelling evidence that this was the case. And his assertion seems to contradict the narrative that Alopen's was a missionary journey to proclaim Christ to the Chinese.

In sum, I find this new book to be a great contribution to historic contextual Christianity—a reminder that Christianity has always been a global faith. Professors and students of global Christianity, church history, and mission history (especially those hailing from Asia) will benefit from this study.

Edward L. Smither

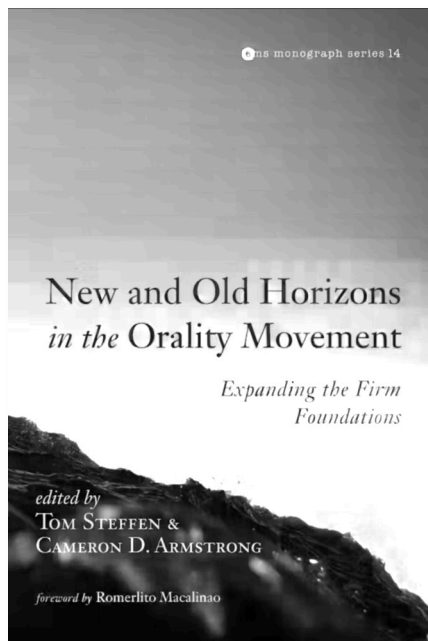
RESPONSE TO CHRISTOPHER BRAINOS' REVIEW: *New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement: Expanding the Firm Foundation* by Tom Steffen and Cameron D. Armstrong, Eds.



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Editors Steffen, Tom and Armstrong, Cameron D., *New and Old Horizons in the Orality Movement: Expanding the Firm Foundation*. Oregon: Pickwick Publications. Pp 304, ISBN: 978-1-6667-3080-7 \$39.00 paperback.



In his review, Brainos uncovered an important point surrounding the orality movement: “There is no standardization in terminology.” As a researcher in this field, I found “orality was an unfortunate misnomer,” so I sought a more apt description term than “orality” and one that was less pejorative than “illiterate.” (See *Connected Learning: How Adults with Limited Formal Education Learn*.) In that dissertation using grounded theory research methodology, I came to realize that so-called “oral learners” preferred to learn through connection or relational means, and this was a new development. People were seen to be integral to the learning process of these adults.

The volume under discussion is part of the EMS Monograph Series and contains papers presented during the Orality Track of the 2020 national EMS meetings. These papers are organized into four parts, one of which Brainos felt seemed more like “rabbit trails” (Part 4) due to the variety of topics discussed. Steffen mentioned this fact in his initial material “Setting the Stage” (xvii) and explained that Part 4 was designed to expand the horizon of orality, as the title suggests.

As for Brainos’ critical feedback on my chapter entitled “Deconstructing Oral Learning,” he made an important point about empowering “individuals to educate themselves and others.” I found oral/connected learners were often “shut out” of

learning opportunities because those possessing the skills to be learned would not share them freely. Skills seemed to be valuable commodities to be shielded from outsiders. In many situations in which oral learners wish to learn, they are indeed “shut out.” They cannot attend the more formal systems described by Brainos, some having failed in that system and others never being allowed in due to life circumstances. Teachers and systems are not accessible to oral/connected learners who typically gather knowledge in more non-formal and informal situations, such as on the job or “on the fly.” In agreement with Brainos, I feel this is a sad commentary and one that brings great shame to oral/connected learners. (See “The Dark Side of Orality” in *Honor, Shame, and the Gospel: Reframing Our Message and Ministry*.)

In some of the courses I teach, I require students to spend time as oral learners, something I did as part of my dissertation research. Students cannot use phones, computers, books, or any type of reading material. This exercise has been excruciating for those who are highly literate. In that vulnerable position, one must rely on others to read for them, to answer emails, and for every interaction that includes print. As Brainos mentions, this unfortunate situation “leaves the learner subservient to the teacher,” and that is something we want to rectify. How might one learn given that situation? Are we accommodating and making space for adults who learn relationally and not through print?

I write and speak about making way for oral learners, advocating for their learning needs, and agree wholeheartedly with Brainos. (See “When Signature Pedagogies Clash: Making Way for the Oral Majority with Connected Learning.”) Having no means readily available for adults with limited formal education (ALFE) to explore further learning opportunities is an inequity and a travesty that we in the orality movement seek to address. I wish all the present established institutions and venues of education – public, private, and in the church – would embody the learning hidden within books (especially within Scripture) and make way for relational learning. Given the extent of orality, I believe it is time for that accommodation.

Bibliography

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