
The Word and the word

by Erich Bridges



Children of the digital age are growing up with a different kind of literacy, we are told. They learn to understand the world not through complete sentences, paragraphs and books, but through ever-changing sounds, images and micro-bursts of text delivered via their digital devices and social media of choice.

"Zits," a comic strip that should be required reading for parents, captured the ambivalence of this new reality in a recent panel. Clueless Mom, who never quits trying to connect with her monosyllabic teen son, approaches him at the fridge:

"And how was your day?" Mom asks.

"Joyous," son Jeremy replies while downloading an armful of snacks. "Tragic. Intense. Deadly boring. There was victory, defeat, suspense, pathos, gluttony, conflict and passion."

"Wow," says Mom, stunned by his sudden eloquence.

"And that was just the text messages," Jeremy adds. LOL (that's textspeak for "laugh out loud").

Yes, the digital revolution seems to be moving many people toward non-print communication -- or in the case of texters, forms of print that few readers of past generations would recognize.

It's a place where much of the world already lives. Four billion people, nearly two-thirds of the world's population, are oral learners, according to mission researchers. They communicate, learn, perceive reality and embrace core beliefs through orally expressed stories, narratives, songs and proverbs, not through books, magazines, newspapers and other forms of print communication traditionally preferred by literate cultures.

Some oral learners are non-literate because of lack of education. Many others, however, belong to the thousands of oral cultures of the globe. Even if they have a formal, written language (many don't), it isn't the way they prefer to interact with the world. Millions of Americans belong

to that group.

Bible "storying" -- accurately communicating the Word of God and the stories of the Bible to oral people through oral means -- has revolutionized missions in recent years. It's not really a new mission strategy, however. Rather, it's the rediscovery of a very old one.

"Stories about Jesus and His teachings circulated widely by oral means for decades before they were written in the Gospels," says Grant Lovejoy, director of Orality Strategies at the International Mission Board. "Those who believed what they heard were genuinely saved and they formed authentic Christian churches without the benefit of reading a copy of the New Testament. Churches were well-established around the Mediterranean basin before the books of the New Testament were written."

The Israelites before them, likewise, learned the Word of God primarily through oral means: public reading, passing on stories within families from generation to generation. Yet "God was able to raise up a distinctive and holy people for His own, despite their very limited literacy and infrequent (or nonexistent) opportunity to read His written revelation," Lovejoy observes. "We need creative strategies to communicate God's message in non-print methods such as face-to-face witness, Bible storytelling, radio broadcasts and distribution of audio and video."

None of this undermines the primacy of the written Word of God. It is alive and active, the source and fountainhead of our faith. The challenge in an oral world is communicating Bible truth to people who are unable or unwilling to read it.

Nor should we underestimate the power of words themselves in communicating the Gospel. Words don't get a lot of respect in the age of multimedia, but they are the building blocks of stories, sermons, songs, drama -- and of personal evangelism, the most powerful form of Christian witness. Yes, you have to "walk the talk." Yes, actions speak louder than words. But words speak.

"Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words," said St. Francis of Assisi. In a time of massive ignorance about the basics of the Gospel, even in churches, words are necessary.

The country preacher's recipe for a good three-point sermon still works: "I tell 'em what I'm gonna tell 'em. Then I tell 'em. Then I tell 'em what I done told 'em."

So does Newsweek editor Jon Meacham's advice to politicians, which also applies to anyone interested in leading others to follow Christ: "First, explain relentlessly. Second, tell us how what you are explaining will lead us to a better place, and describe that place. Assume nothing; repeat yourself until you are numb. Only then will the message begin to sink in."

If your words match your walk, the message will find its mark. "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver" (Proverbs 25:11, KJV).

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