



# Oral Literacy and Concerns for Leadership Development and Evangelism<sup>1</sup>

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Ted Ward

## Putting Literacy into Perspective

Evangelism should not be restricted to those who can read. The masses of illiterate people in the world need special attention lest they be unintentionally omitted from Christian evangelism. The following perspectives provide the basis for this paper.

1. Data on literacy rates and trends are elusive, incomplete, and subject to distortion for political purposes. Thus, systematic demographic analyses of the skills and habits of reading are commonly unreliable. Interpretations of these data are commonly biased to support presuppositions that reinforce traditional views of literacy as a fundamental indicator of intelligence, societal development, and worth of persons.

2. Assuming that literacy is a necessity for intellectual, moral, and social development suggests a cause-and-effect relationship that is unrealistic. But, too much confidence is placed in the wisdom that is assumed to come from being able to read. Such assumed wisdom is most evident in matters of intellectual maturation. The result is that much Christian outreach is directed toward those who are more educated, who have larger vocabularies, are comfortable with higher levels of reading, and engage in more complex reasoning.

Literacy is more available to people in developed societies, but it is likely only to be a coincident factor in moral and social maturation. It is a serious mistake to assume that people who are more verbal and more comfortable with higher reading levels are disposed toward being more morally upright and concerned for truth and righteousness.

3. Reading, especially personal access to God's Word, is of value in the process of spiritual development. However, reading alone cannot bring the evidence of the works of the Holy Spirit unless it is accompanied by experiential involvement in the practical and concrete pursuit of godliness. Reading can contribute to one's awareness and understanding of the created universe and the ways that God works in and through it to fulfill his purposes.

4. Since reading is the apparent door of access to the huge wealth of the world's literature, it is tempting to assume that learning to read is the most important element in the learning process. As often is the case, an either/or argument rarely enlightens. Literacy is valuable, but to neglect oral evangelism is restrictive and neglects the truth that God is much more concerned about the whole of life than just the human reasoning skills.

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<sup>1</sup> Unpublished Document, 2004

Therefore, people in highly literate societies tend to assume that educational environments and curricula that put reading skills and tasks foremost are the most effective and worthwhile. What would we gain if oral emphasis in teaching and learning were to expand us beyond our fixation on print? Some also assume that learners who can read and write well are more likely to become skillful in matters of social learning, moral development, and spiritual maturation. Although print is valuable, what methods are more effective for teaching these matters?

5. Since exposition, declaration, exhortation, explanation, assertion, and argumentation are the most common forms in a teacher's oral repertoire, these investments in "telling" become the central purposes of the school's literacy process. And the church follows along. Thus, critical review, aesthetic appreciation, meditative reflection, and spiritual enlightenment are neglected or discounted in the quest for literacy's objectives. Both teaching and learning are prone to become sterile and mechanical through the misuse of reading. Enhancing the process of accurate remembering often is a more effective process.

## **The Importance of Literacy in Contemporary Society**

**The reasoning of today's globally interacting society places literacy as its cornerstone.** The vast global publishing industry is both a reflection of the importance of reading and a stimulus for the furtherance of reading. Although it was long assumed that literacy was more valued in free societies and that the restrictive tendencies of totalitarian societies led to benign neglect of the importance of publishing, many of the polarized generalizations have been replaced by a growing awareness that literacy, publishing, and reading can serve a wide array of political doctrines.

The outreach of Christianity has also demonstrated its persistent fulfillment of God's intentions to bring the whole world into the effective witness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Since the earliest days of apostolic witness, literacy has played an important role. In today's Christian engagement in evangelization the means and methods are increasingly dependent on print (text and graphic forms), including the panoply of electronic modes. Evangelism is still most effectively accomplished through one-on-one personal interaction, but no one denies the importance of large-scale uses of print, ranging from books to audio and many modes of television and internet.

It would be correct to say that literacy has been more accessible to affluent societies; and since modernization tends to be correlated with affluence, it is tempting to assume that literacy produces affluence. Socio-economic advantages are better understood as a cause rather than a consequence of increases in literacy.

**From the industrial revolution through the emergence of electronic technology, the social importance of documents and objectified information has increased steadily.** The computer era has transformed the industrial age by radically increasing the social importance of documents and objectified information. Even from the start, industrialization brought into focus the importance of documents and graphic representations of all sorts—from architectural and engineering drawings to mass-produced directories, manuals, and computer-printed roadside billboards. Gutenberg and Gates are likely to be sustained by history as the icons of the early and late industrial ages, and many identify the post-Gutenberg era as the "information age."

Americans are increasingly anxious about “jobs moving overseas.” These economic shifts are most commonly a consequence of opening up international opportunity. All of this has come about through increases in literacy, access to education, and the gaining of employable work-skills. What most Americans are fixated upon is not the social development that these outcomes represent, but the short-term effects on wealth, ownership, and sharing a rightful slice of benefits—something the rest of the world has long since assumed to be part of the price for free enterprise in a free world. From the industrial revolution through the emergence of electronic technology, the assumption that information is knowledge has increased steadily. Increased literacy across the world is one of the major factors in the sometimes frightening shaking of the western, especially American, domination of the world economy. As more people in more nations are becoming able to read, they participate more fully in the making and using of the products of technology; and thus their valuing of reading increases. Reading isn’t just for entertainment anymore, and it hasn’t been for a long time. Entertainment is actually a relatively late use of reading. Reading was originally devoted to learning and to preserve materials (religious traditions, literature, law, medicine, history, the classics) not to recreation.

**Anxious discussions about postmodern social philosophy dramatize popular frustrations.**

Whether in science, philosophy, or religion, concern over the futility of objectified knowledge as a means to establish truth is widespread. The disillusionment with rationalism is forcing people to seek new ways to determine truth. It is clear that science has expanded into matters that cannot be grasped with the principles that served us well for generations. Not only are ethical issues emerging which could hardly be imagined a century ago, but the axioms of physics, astronomy, biology, chemistry, and geology are quite literally becoming unglued. “Hard science” people who have looked askance at social science are now discovering that certainty is more elusive than they thought.

Thus we describe the times as post-modern (or post-postmodern). Many of the axioms, paradigms, and propositions in which we once took refuge are apparently untrustworthy. To be “modern” was to be able to understand experience as a set of facts. But what we once saw as “modern” is now becoming old-fashioned. Even the pragmatism that gave shape and form to modernism is seen as unreliable.

This transformation of the structure of thought has affected almost everything in academia. Its spillover into art, music, and literature has begun, but most Americans are mystified. What is going on? Who forgot to lock the door? People groping for answers to vexing questions and people eager for more thorough comprehension of curious circumstances combine forces to produce a surge of interest in sharing information and thus extending knowledge. Confidence in objectivity and science is waning, but in every nation the importance of literacy, and not simply the literacy of print-based reading, is becoming a mark of development. No group of people or sector of society can ignore this fact without ruling themselves out of the benefits of change.

## **Why Literacy is Controversial Among Christians**

In the back of our minds there are crucial assumptions about literacy, especially about the importance of reading and the relationship between reading skills and the development of people. The purpose of this section is to develop the understanding of the social and religious meaning of literacy. First we identify two questionable assertions and the problematic reactions that respond to

each. Then we examine some basic misunderstandings that cloud the issue of focusing evangelistic efforts on those who can be reached and nurtured by print media.

**Assertion 1—Literacy is a natural phase of intellectual development.** Institutionalized formal education presumes sequences and stages whenever possible for any and every purpose, especially for creating schedules of teaching. It has been a rule of modern cultures, one usually taken for granted, that reading skills are properly developed in the first years of schooling and that in one way or another these skills determine and establish the capability to continue all learning that follows. Thus it is assumed that all normal people will learn to read and that reading will enable them to continue developing intellectually as naturally as summer follows spring. Among the consequences of this flawed assertion is the habit of judging reading competency as an indicator of mental capability. Recent examination of the meaning of *literacy* suggests that it is a complex mental process and includes visual recognition of variable and differential patterns, associating these patterns with sounds to create selected meanings with appropriate visual-aural symbols. Child psychologists suggest that this complex series of mental processes constitutes one of the most demanding learning tasks of one's lifetime.

Most children master the similarly complex task of speaking the mother tongue with rudimentary vocabulary, grammar, and syntax to a reasonably high level of competency before they begin their schooling. Literacy is an example of social learning that depends substantially on experiences with others in the social environment: parents, siblings, other relatives, and children in the neighborhood. These various experiences interact with and ultimately fulfill the child's unfolding process of development; but it would be quite a stretch to assert that reading constitutes a natural phase of intellectual development.

**Assertion 2—Literacy is essential to a Christian's spiritual development.** Literacy is commonly presumed to be an essential part of spiritual development. Surely being able and willing to read the Bible is a valid basis of spiritual development, but the major problem with this "literacy is essential" argument is that it attributes spirituality and Christian character to intellectual accomplishments. Push it to its extreme and it says *those who think better are better Christians*. Whatever truth this judgment may reflect, it is based on a fallacy. The rational basis is better represented in the following thoughts: one's spiritual welfare is enhanced by knowledgeable understanding of God's expectations and intentions and is continuously nurtured by thoughtful reflection on God's Word.

**Misconception of Literacy: Literacy is widely perceived as the primary consequence of learning.** Schooling begins as an exercise in the skills and values of reading. The timeworn presumption of the purpose of schooling, "to learn the 3-Rs," refers not to '*rithmetic*,' '*riting*,' and '*reading*,' but the reverse sequence, beginning with *reading*; reading always gets first place! To become a good reader is a transcendent purpose to be fulfilled by school-learning. To read extensively and precisely is evidence of having learned the skills and habits of reading, thus illustrating the primary consequences and value of schooling. But although schooling supports literacy, it does not follow that literacy without a moral and godly foundation and purpose leads to Christian educational outcomes.

**Misconception of Literacy: Literacy is evidence of mental competency.** Those who read well are often able and willing to invest themselves more widely in reading, but not everyone brings the same abilities to learning to read. It is generally assumed that reading is more than an outcome; it is also a predictor. Learning outcomes, especially those that prove most useful in the domain of formal

education, are commonly assumed to result from being blessed with extraordinary competencies. Thus the logic is circular: the brightest learners are those who read well, and they become the brightest learners because they are the best readers. All of which raises this question: Is mental competency inherently Christian?

### **Arguments about Literacy as Necessity**

How important is literacy to Christian ministry? Christianity places importance on truth. In the sense that Jesus spoke of himself as Truth, truth is not an abstract quality but a person, not objectified but personified. Nevertheless, the history of Christianity shows that followers of Christ have been enormously preoccupied with *documents* and the way documentary corroboration is assumed to establish and authenticate truthfulness. Especially in the highly developed sectors of the western world, it is common to view reading and writing as competencies that facilitate Christian thought.

Christianity has benefited from the consequences of technology in the modern world. The printing press, for example, has become one of the most valuable and extensively used technological resources in the history of Christianity. The more highly developed societies have benefited more from the literacy-related innovations and societal trends than have the less developed and more isolated societies. But since reading has been made widely available, it is extensively used, and thus it has become a central feature in worship, in prayer, in corporate communication, and in all our modes of study. But to what extent is literacy an *essential* criterion for Christian evangelism and nurture?

## **The Importance of Literacy to the Christian Community**

Christianity, especially the fidelity of Christian doctrine, depends upon the authority of the written text of the Bible. As in the more modern traditions of courts and legal adjudication, the foundation for all legal judgment is assumed to be at its best when there is a *document* dealing with the particulars. Thus the written representation, the document, is afforded more respect and credibility than the oral tradition. The Bible is taken to be, in just this manner, a foundational body of truth for the Christian community.

Christianity is a religion of *beliefs* in specific doctrinal propositions and historical events and as such it depends upon documentary sources for verification and authority. For this the Bible is vital. But the Bible reveals God's involvement in the spiritual realm as well. For this we depend upon the Bible as a disciplinary framework within which God the Holy Spirit affects the hearts of believers as they are nurtured toward conformity with "the mind of Christ."

In the Bible's first reference to written documentation, God's commandments delivered through Moses were documented for humankind's benefit as inscriptions on "stone tablets." Although not the earliest use of writing in human history, this is the first reference to written communication of any sort in the biblical record.

### **The Bible as the *Written* Word of God**

God's word is revealed in the Bible as 1) a body of text through which God provides a self-revelation and 2) the revealed *person* of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, redeemer and Lord. "All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness . . ." (2

Timothy 3:16). In Christ the Word of God has been “made flesh and lived among us.” The Word of God is more than a holy book. It is more than a body of information or a manual of rules and instructions. It represents, establishes, and nurtures the spiritual relationship that constitutes the basis of the Christian life. The Bible enables the work of the Holy Spirit in that it provides the story and the substance of what God intends that his people know of his purposes, plans, and provisions for them as they move through life with God’s guidance and nurturance.

The Word of God is a settled and affirmed covenant between God and his people. The specific nature of that covenant is communicated, illustrated, explained, and assured by the text of the Bible. Through the Bible God is revealed as the creator, the sustainer, and the intervening judge of good and evil. God’s intentions are made clear and God is revealed as omnipotent yet compassionate and redemptive, loving so much “that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

God’s outreach, evangelistic purpose, and fulfillment of salvation for sinful humankind are guided and enabled by the testimony of the Word of God. Thus the missiological fulfillment of God’s work in the world is facilitated by developing one’s understanding of the Bible. The Bible presents itself as God’s instrument of calling all humankind to himself, of bringing those he chooses into the fellowship of Christ as redeemed believers, and of providing substantial spiritual “growth food” for those who choose to develop in the way of Christ.

### **Literacy as a Handicap for Evangelizers**

It may seem odd to assert that such an obviously essential document as the Bible might in any way constitute a handicap for evangelizers. But, exaggerated emphasis on being able *to read* the Bible for oneself can overwhelm its purpose as a basis for truth and faith. Effective evangelism does not start with the assumption that people must first be able to read the Bible. Literacy, when it leads to misrepresenting the Bible as an essential first step through which we must approach God, does indeed constitute a handicap to evangelization. Though reading is a valuable skill and should not be discouraged, it can be a handicap to evangelization. This concern is the major reason that mission and evangelism specialists have become convinced that the most promising use of the Bible is as a source of stories to tell, to dramatize, to sing about, and to discuss while bringing people into a more full awareness of who God is and what he wants to do for needy people through Jesus Christ.

Telling the story of the good news of the saving grace of Jesus Christ is the major first step of Christian evangelization, not teaching people to read. Indeed, the pro-literacy emphasis in recent years has been recognized for its one inherent weakness. When reading is assumed to be a precondition it gets in the way, consumes valuable time, and diverts attention from the basic message of the Gospel.

### **Utilizing Tradition and “Prepared Soil”**

It warms the hearts of folklorists to note that as a preacher Jesus was essentially a storyteller. His frequent use of moralized illustrations, commonly known as parables, is widely recognized as a distinctive mark of his oratory. Jesus told stories and described relationships based on the everyday experiences and the common knowledge of the people. He used metaphors at every turn, most commonly botanical metaphors about plants, planting, growing, farming, crops, agronomy, and flowers.

In one of the most detailed accounts of Jesus introducing himself to a potential convert, the woman at the Sychar well (John 4), Jesus engaged in a completely oral process. He did *not* read to the woman and the conversation got rather far along before he referred to a Scripture text to illustrate and to assert God's intentions. In Jesus' encounter with this woman, Jesus engaged the woman first by identifying himself with a basic human need: "Will you give me a drink?" As in most one-to-one and small-group interactions described in the Gospels, the evangelizer used oral methods: story telling, conversation, and questions in which the participants had a recognizable personal interest. Those who evangelize today would be well-advised to notice that the hearer's own recall of godly truth was respected and encouraged, even when faulty.

## Elements of Evangelism

The account of the woman of Sychar suggests basic elements of evangelism. It is based on who God is, what he has said and done, and the necessity for a personal response to his love. Thus, in simplest terms, effective evangelism will be concerned with *awareness*, *vocabulary*, and *response to the choices* that are available.

**The purpose:** To develop evangelistic procedures that are reasonably consistent reflections of the ways and means of Jesus.

**The recommendation:** Before attempting to develop any evangelistic procedure and the instructional materials that will facilitate it, start with a thorough examination of the way Jesus brought the Gospel to life. The prevailing habit today is to begin with the presupposition that technology and media will point the way. Instead, after reflection on the way Jesus introduced the Gospel, the Christian should attempt to use techniques, strategies, and style that are as similar as possible to what Jesus did.

**The strategy:** The uniqueness of this strategy is in putting Jesus' specific instructions and examples into a working sequence that follows a generalization of the evidences of the way he mentored his followers. Rather than taking the Gospels as whole blocks of narrated activities and sequences of propositions, we assume that each of the disciples, the followers of Jesus, began with a somewhat different background and unique experiences. They encountered Jesus through a series of events, somewhat overlapping the experiences of their colleagues. The commonness of the meaning and effect of interaction with Jesus suggests that the message of the Gospel can be better understood as differentiated responses to a common structure of experiences. The analysis of the Gospel can proceed more confidently from a minimal set of experiential purposes.

In the development of this strategy, a search for appropriate categories was undertaken across the whole of Jesus' message and examples. Three phases of response to a person's interactions with Jesus are suggested as a minimal structure. No two reviewers would select the same series of events, stories, and experiences. Nor would any two analysts propose the structural articulation in exactly the same way. Thus, rigid adherence to the strategy as presented here is surely not intended.

**Three phases, from *awareness* to *choice*:** The intention is to develop evangelistic procedures that are consistent reflections of the ways and means of Jesus. The effects that encounters with Jesus would have produced in followers are represented as three phases of an evangelistic model or design.

Each of the experiences would serve either to intensify the participant's sensitivities, or it would assist in the movement along the series of three outcome phases:

Phase 1: Establishing awareness

Phase 2: Acquiring vocabulary

Phase 3: Confronting choices

**First warning:** Already several likely misunderstandings should be warned against. Surely oversimplifying each transaction Jesus engaged in with a disciple or inquirer into three phases of outcomes invites criticism. Be aware that there is nothing to be gained by debating dogma around the idea of “from awareness to choice.” For some of us, experiences with Jesus began with *awareness* that was already available, even from seemingly irrelevant experiences. *Vocabulary*, too, is highly variable, and is intended to represent more than the meaning of words. And *choice* suggests not only the consciousness of a choice but also the level of commitment that is invested in the choice.

**Making each phase valuable:** One of the clearest distinctions between evangelization that produces no fruit and the evangelization practiced by Jesus is in the attention given to each of the three phases. The most obvious problem deals with sequence: for example, when a conclusion is urged before awareness is fully established. Another problem occurs when acquisition of vocabulary is used as an awareness-building experience; in evangelism, defining words is far less important than coming to grips with the ideas and issues those words represent. Many people who can talk Christianity are virtually ignorant of its reality. Others profess conclusions based on awareness dimly felt but lacking in experiential vocabulary.

**Second warning:** As noted above, **vocabulary** means a consistent and increasingly familiar nomenclature that allows symbols or words to organize, expand, and communicate ideas. *Vocabulary* should not mean the transcendence of words over the ideas that give those words connection to the awareness that they represent. This use of *vocabulary* is at the heart of evangelization as “*Teaching of Bible as a Foreign Language*.”

**Respecting the sequence and progression of each phase:** Each of the three phases is evident in each of Jesus' evangelistic encounters.

Phase 1—*Establishing awareness*. The conversion of the inquirer is more likely if the evangelistic process concentrates on the establishing of the inquirer's awareness. This process must move the inquirer from disinterest to interest, from escape from the truth to engagement with the truth-claims, even when they are unpleasant. The inquirer's attention will need to be engaged and his or her defensiveness neutralized and offset. Rejection of the personal relevance and application of the Gospel will need to be replaced by willingness to accept the possibilities of personal meaning—the first stage of transformational application. In classical terms, this phase includes openness to the possibility of personal guilt and, if it is to move forward, will be accompanied by confession.

Phase 2—*Acquiring vocabulary*. This phase is concerned with developing the capacity to hear and discuss the meaning of the conversion process and its consequences. Although the expanding understanding will result in the addition of terms and the more discriminating use of words, this expansion is not to be valued simply evidence of increasing intellect or knowledge. The nature of the Christian community is represented in Scripture in terms of a body, a family, and a community of people enjoying social community with one another. All of these images depend on participation in conversation, in fellowship, in sharing, and in emotional affiliation. The essence of this relationship is

nurtured through a common *acquiring of vocabulary*. It is evidence of a community's internalized need to know God.

Phase 3—*Confronting choices*. This phase is perhaps the most familiar. Some will recognize it and think of it as the classical “decision for Christ.” But it is more than that. It is built on the awareness established in Phase 1 and the vocabulary acquisitions from Phase 2. The inquirer is discovering the nature of the choices to be made and responding to the claims of the just God whose love and gracious provisions for a sinner are brought into focus. The end of this third phase is the confronting of choice in a godly way—a way that represents the start of a new life. Redemption has been made complete in the accepting moment wherein the choice is “to let go and let God” be fulfilled in this new life.

### **Teaching of the Bible as a Foreign Language (TOBFL): What Lies Behind The Title?**

The topic of evangelism is undertaken with fear and trepidation. Although it is important—better to say *basic*, it is often taken for granted that everyone means more or less the same thing when the word is used. It is especially hazardous to approach the topic with any sort of a simple formula, whether a series of “spiritual laws” or a procedural list. This sort of thinking has been tried and found wanting.

Creative thought is much like discovery: the thought is there and what the discoverer must do is to uncover it—to find it and then to determine its worth in action. In just this sort of process, my recent studies and writings on the “orality” issue in Christian outreach have led me to discover another question: If evangelism were understood as it was first undertaken by Jesus and the apostles, would it have different characteristics and possibly greater effectiveness?

The issue is not illiteracy so much as it is the tendency to conceptualize evangelism as a bookish endeavor. Clearly, Jesus built his approach to people upon their experiences. He knew how to connect their experiences to the truth he represented. He spoke of the Book, yes, and he knew how to draw upon what the people knew of it. But his approach was conversational and not print-based. Even as he drew upon their knowledge of the texts, he moved people to an increased awareness, but not simply by thumping on the truth of the texts. Matthew noticed this and used it clearly six times in one chapter: “You have heard that it was said . . . but I tell you . . .”

“Learning English as a foreign language” has become a familiar way to describe the difference between the learning tasks of newcomers to English and the learning tasks of those who are refining their English usage skills. Specifically, a learning task that is in structural contrast or conflict with one's native language is especially difficult. The learning must be taught in ways that are different from the approaches that would be most common among those who are familiar with the native-speakers of the language. One of the more practical illustrations of this problem is the difficulty of helping Spanish-speaking children learn English from books and exercises designed for children who already have a background and experience in speaking English.

Learning the Bible is not altogether different. For some Christians, especially in their early years of Christian experience, understanding the vocabulary and teachings of the Bible is somewhat foreign.

The continuing development of familiarity and understanding of the Bible among the people of God is a fundamental task for those who lead the church; and competency in “teaching the Bible as a foreign language” is basic to leadership in evangelism. If the habits of thinking and talking about the things of God, especially as they are defined and described in authoritative Scripture, are unfamiliar to a person, the resulting misunderstandings are not different from those encountered in a foreign language.

Jesus used illustrative stories and practical encounters in ordinary life as the way to avoid misunderstandings. He rarely used explanations and wordy attempts at clarification when a concrete illustration was available. To this basic procedure, Jesus added all sorts of personal touches in the relationship that was unfolding between himself and the other person.

Many of the situations in which Jesus seeks to develop a redemptive relationship between himself and others provide illustrations of the procedure. Consider the five textual illustrations that follow. Each of the three phases of spiritual development is represented in each of the situations and its accompanying texts. Some texts from the Bible more clearly represent a certain phase, while others clearly facilitate another phase. The purpose is not to classify the texts but to see how each encounter contributes to the whole process of spiritual maturation.

**1. “And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people” (Matthew 4:19).**

Observing the fishing boats, the nets, the net-mending task and the presence of others of the family, Jesus invites in his voice of command, “Follow me. . . .” He makes these chosen men aware that he has a purpose for them, and he makes it clear in terms they could understand: “I will make you fish for people.” They quickly became aware of Jesus’ purpose and they chose it for themselves. Their initial understanding was spotty, at best. They had followed the public career of John the Baptist, they had seen Jesus in his ministry of miracles, compassion, and zeal for God; but just at this moment they made the decision that was upon them—right then. And they followed. No further questions.

**2. “Get up, take your mat and walk” (Mark 2:9).** With the crowd pressing all around them in this little house, a man appeared through the roof and was lowered to Jesus feet. No one said anything. It was clear enough what the need was, but surely this was too much to ask of the newcomer. Rabbis had tried to help; the family was in deep sorrow and anguish. His friends had helped as much as they knew how. Face it: this young man cannot walk. Jesus sized up the situation and came right to the major issue. This fellow is trapped in sin and darkness. Jesus gave no chance for doubters to rationalize the situation: “Son, your sins are forgiven.” Who is to say that Jesus misunderstood the need? The boy had said nothing except with his eyes. But the cynics were ready to pounce: Isn’t that blasphemy? Who can forgive sins other than God himself? Jesus could feel it; he knew what they were thinking. “So what would you suggest?” he challenges. “You think something easier, like healing his lameness would be better? No, so that you will know that I have authority on earth to forgive sins, I tell you, take up your mat and go home.” They had a very big party that night at this fellow’s house.

**3. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).** The apostle Thomas had just asked, “Since we don’t know where you are going, how can we know the way?” Jesus had just startled his disciples with the news that he was leaving them. So the question was reasonable. But Jesus made a curious response, a response to challenge their awareness of who he was and how completely their destiny was wrapped up in his: “I am the

way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.”

“Philip said, Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.” But this response obviously disappointed Jesus because it revealed a huge gap in Philip’s awareness. So Jesus answered, “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” Here is a key to Christian life: to walk with Jesus is fellowship with God.

4. **“Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).** This statement just doesn’t seem like the right moment. It’s too late. Not even sympathy and desperate encouragement could cut through the stark hopelessness of the situation. If ever a person could cry in utter despair, this moment of crucifixion was it. With a voice almost choked with the pain and torment, somehow he made himself heard by Jesus. His life was all wrapped up in this fatal moment: his awareness of his condition: “I am getting what I deserve.” His simple apology for his wasted life: “There is justice in my punishment.” The awareness of the difference that Jesus represented: “But this man with us has done nothing wrong.” We marvel at what happened next. Whether this dying man had a precise understanding of grace, forgiveness, propitiation, salvation, redemption or any of the other theologically correct words, we cannot say. What we do know is that Jesus was still conscious enough to recognize faith when he saw it. And then Jesus *heard* it: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Do we recognize the vital theological vocabulary of a sinner save by grace? The Bible gives us the response of Jesus: “I tell you truly, today you will be with me in paradise.” *What a benediction!*

5. **The crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law. (Matthew 7:28-29)** Reading these words reminds us that this man, Jesus, was accustomed to hearing himself compared to the great prophets. He made startling claims about his closeness to God, and even his oneness with the creator. But what these people recalled was simply that Jesus *taught* as one who had authority. And they compared him most favorably with their “teachers of the law,” the scribes and rabbi. We call Jesus “the great teacher.” But what are we basing this on? *Great*, in the sense of knowledgeable? Certainly, but would this alone impress people? Was it because he was well organized? An effective explainer of difficult principles? Perhaps yes to all of this. But surely there was more.

What do we really know about his style and personal presence as a great teacher? It surely wasn’t that Jesus was self-important and pompous. He was not as *their teachers of the law*: impressed with their own brilliance, always ready to put people down for their presumptions and timid remarks, a better talker than listener, altogether sufficient for every problem or dilemma, quick on the trigger. Unlike the pedantic styles of preaching and teaching they associated with religion, Jesus’ style of dialogue and his selection of topical material were different. His followers couldn’t miss it. They were aware that Jesus’ voice was the voice of *authority*. From the disciple’s experiential position, Jesus was fulfilling the three pedagogical phases of dialogue, reflection, and discussion identified above. From their experiences with Jesus their awareness was enhanced and established, their vocabulary was developed and made more substantial, and through it all the necessity of their own responsibility for choices became a matter of personal fulfillment.

## Encouraging Literacy Among Christians

**Pressures and influences of the contemporary world.** In the face of increased educational opportunity, literacy is becoming more a necessity. It is evident in the requirements of job skills and the demand for reading and writing for effective participation in the media revolution. Thus whether or not it is essential to salvation and development as a Christian (we would argue that it is not) it is important to encourage Christians in all societies to develop literacy competencies. The issue is effective participation in the world of increasingly demanding work, the world of intercultural participation, and the world of widely circulating and exchanging information.

**Unity of the Body of Christ.** Being able to read a language in common with others is an important aid to Christian fellowship and unity. Searching for deeper meanings and more precise applications of the Word of God is substantially assisted by the skills of literacy. The sharing of biblical interpretation and commentary in written form is one of the most important of all means of Christian growth. The sense of unity in the Holy Spirit of God is deepened through the development of conversation, interaction, and critique of one another through the use of the written text of Scripture as the criterion of judgment of truth.

**Sharing access to truth through literacy.** Reading allows for leadership that is subject to authority higher and beyond the unreliable memory of casual acquaintance with the images, ideas, and ideals of God's Word. One of the ways that the Word of God becomes more clear and precise to those who desire to seek God's truth is through the details of text that make the *story* more accountable. If we understand leadership in terms of Biblical criteria that describe and define the offices of the church and the godly character that God wishes for us, the best protection against heresy and distortion of God's instructions derives not from the acclaim of the worth and wisdom of the preacher or evangelizer but from the evidence in the Holy Bible. Among illiterate people, a persuasive leader can sway and swing the people away from revelations that God has given in documentary form. It is no accident that God's people, since the leadership of Moses and then of the Patriarchs, have been "the people of the book." Nor should we overlook the grand innovations of historical communication that are indebted to the motivations of Christian leaders pursuing their commitment to make the Bible more accessible: Huss, Gutenberg, Luther, Wycliffe, Livingston, Townsend, and hundreds more.

**Avoiding institutionalization and meritocracy.** As surely as literacy is commonly motivated by the concern for outreach, evangelization, and transformation, the restrictions of literacy can usually be traced to misused institutional authority and to the power of wealth and office. In the earlier days of international movement of people and ideas, certain groups could benefit themselves and extend their power by imposing or extending ignorance. Illiteracy was taken as an evidence of inferior intellect and social ability. Even early democracies were more concerned about restricting voting to the noble, privileged, and wealthy than they were in working toward ennobling, empowering, and extending the competencies of effective leadership.

**Furthering social equity through literacy.** When the Bible is in the hands of the people, especially if they have been able to gain the skills to read and comprehend it, the church that will emerge will have the freedom to think, to decide, and to form themselves into a coherent unit of God's family. This process has been repeated over and over again through the centuries of church history. The stance of the church is nourished by its engagement with God through his Word. Access to the

Word is often but not always dependent on the enlightenment and disciplining of God's people as they make use of their sharing of the Word.

In cultural situations where the traditions of literacy are not yet established, memorization, preaching through the retelling of Biblical stories, and verbal interaction among the people through sharing of insights and parables provide the foundation for spiritual nurture. Although literacy is never identified as a requisite of godliness, it seems often to follow rather promptly from godly experience and thus to enable a convert's personal acquisition of truth from God's book of history and guidance.

## Literacy Learning as Social Action

**Salt, light, and a cup of water.** Christian ethics are demonstrated in these three symbols: *salt*—to provide flavor and the qualities of tastefulness and preservation in a world too readily reduced to blandness, dull lack of purpose, and spoilage without it; *light*—to overcome the darkness that comes into a life, sin-blighted by separation from God; and a *cup of cold water*, to restore and sustain shared humanity. These three symbols of the sharing of human resources are only the start. For the Christian, sharing the resources that have been provided to us through the graciousness of God goes much further and is often focused on the good things that become available through learning and through the developing skills that enable their effective use.

Literacy provides a particularly important example of this sort of sharing. Christian missionaries have often begun their work by teaching English. Sharing their own language skills with people who are eager to speak, read, and understand English while at the same time encouraging bilingual and multilingual skills within church communities often puts Christian leaders in the language education business! In the perspective of God's purposes, this is another example of the "cup of cold water." Identifying and relating effectively to the concerns, needs, and interests of people can be a vital step toward evangelization.

**Teaching people to read—a ministry of sharing.** Literacy sometimes is a symbol of domination, especially if the person or group needing to read is directly or indirectly denied access to literacy learning. It is unjust, and no romanticized alibi from history or claim to cultural purism will alter the evidence that literate persons are quite likely to gain power and use it for social control over those who are not given access to literacy. Sharing is central to the quality of life of the community of Christ. To fail to share access to literacy and to the tools of reading is inappropriate among Christians.

Reading ability is a standard characteristic among those who have access to even the most basic education. The lack of access to such education demonstrates impoverishment and suggests that some powerful tool of discrimination may be at work. Into this sort of situation the followers of Christ often bring the salt and light that begins with teaching literacy.

**Teaching as a ministry of relating.** Whether the purpose of the teaching is Bible knowledge, language skill, or health habits, teaching can be done in such a way that it is liberating to the learner. Educational experiences that pose themselves as private possessions should be seen as unworthy of the Christ-like examples of sharing and concern for one another. If literacy, for example, results in

deepening the chasm between rich and poor or between the well-fed and the starving, it is serving evil purposes. The purposes that honor God and fulfill *his* purposes are those that bring people together in the fellowship of the cross. This motive calls for literacy that is taught in such a way that it relates people and establishes a stronger sense of interdependent community. Christian purposes faithfully pursued are not those that result in dissonances and separation of people from one another.

**Avoiding misunderstanding of intentions.** Evangelization is not a game. There are no winners and losers. The Bible never draws upon such images. There are the people of God joining in the godly purpose of reaching out to the lost, and there are those who have accepted God's gracious offer and who have come under the influence of the Holy Spirit. These latter must be treated with sensitivity and respect and engaged in thoughtful processes through which they will be nurtured in the love of Jesus Christ. Common offenses include references to these persons as "targets" of evangelism, tallied converts to add to a list, and other failures to show compassion and respect for those for whom Christ has died.

**Keeping the emphasis on realities.** The appeal of the Gospel is based on its warmth and honesty. These qualities are fragile in the face of evangelistic approaches that depend on emotionality and manipulation. One of the reasons that many people are cynical about "soul-winning" is that it so easily engages in the not-so-fine art of promoting symbols rather than presenting choices regarding realities. People don't like to find that their spiritual yearnings are being oversimplified. Four spiritual laws, five claims of God, six smiling moments and other memorable gimmicks often wear out before they can be digested. It is hard to imagine Jesus adding such reductions of the eternal drama to his sermons. Symbols are never as valuable as realities. That is one of the keys for evangelism of the post-modern era. Words that need to be defined are less potent than words flowing from the context of a story. Jesus was not only a proclaimer and a healer; he was a storyteller. His hearers understood him through his stories, and they acknowledged his being different from the religious teachers with whom they were familiar. ". . . the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (Matthew 7:28, 29).

## **The Story—Outreach to the Illiterate**

It has been rare to encounter intentional evangelization of the illiterate, except in the rare and more remote realm of "foreign missions." Much more common was the assumption that since everyone *should* learn to read, Christians should focus their efforts on those who can learn to read and write—encouraging literacy in order to transform illiterate people into literate people before expecting to get very far with evangelizing them.

When the first shipload of American missionaries left Boston destined for the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) early in the nineteenth century, they took two "language instructors" with them, two of the boys who had been abducted from their home islands by whaling captains and abandoned in Boston. Several such waifs had taken refuge against the Boston winter cold in the basement of Park Street Church and learned enough English that they made sense of the sermons they overheard. They came to Christ in repentance, were baptized, and were invited to return to their families in

Hawaii with the boatload of highly motivated Bostonian missionaries, serving as their on-board language teachers during the voyage around Cape Horn.

These highly educated and well-intentioned missionaries assumed that evangelization of Hawaii would begin with teaching literacy. There was little precedent for whole families of missionaries entering a new region with the Gospel, so it is not surprising that one of their first projects was to start schools. An important clue to their awareness of the needs and feelings of people was their concern that the Hawaiian children should not be introduced to learnings that were not accessible to their parents. Hiram Bingham, who was himself recently graduated from a theological school in New England, describes in his diaries and letters what we would call today *adult education classes*. The Bostonians were avid readers and highly motivated to learn. They gave priority to improving their Hawaiian language skills and creating a system for writing down this previously oral language. The results were networks of friendships across the islands and a growing stack of translated materials.

But it was not soon to result in conversions to Christ. These pioneer missionaries had learned to speak and understand the Hawaiian language during the many weeks en route, but then they fell back on their own traditions and previous experiences in what they did next. Once ashore, they found themselves seriously overdressed for the tropics and were disappointed to discover that some of their notions of evangelism didn't fit the situation. Although some of the islanders seemed interested in the missionaries as people in that they were willing to interact and carry on long conversations, there didn't seem to be much enthusiasm for "the white man's God," a common problem in this first period of American intercultural missions. So they built New England style houses for themselves, and looking ahead, schools to train Hawaiians to read and write and to become pastors. After several years, they started a secondary school, in which their own children and Hawaiian children were taught side by side. In keeping with their concern for literacy and schooling as missionary motives, they determined that the schools and the curriculum they were building for the Hawaiian children should be at the same level as for their own children. (Today's Lahaina High School on the island of Maui comes from this heritage and is a direct successor of one of those earliest mission schools.) It wasn't until after their schools were attracting a strong enrolment that God finally allowed them to have a convert!

But wait! Trouble. Their convert was *blind*. He didn't seem promising as a village evangelist, which is what they had been praying for. All he seemed to have going for him was a phenomenal memory. He could tell stories in the Hawaiian style, and people flocked to hear him. The missionaries soon caught on. They spent weeks telling him Bible stories. He remembered everything and promptly passed it all along to those who heard him. Many came to Christ through the ministry of this blind, illiterate man. Thus many of the churches still standing in Hawaii had their beginnings in the efforts of this blind evangelist. Seeds planted by this evangelizer who could neither read nor write constituted church-planting through sharing Bible stories!

For many who study mission history this is a favorite story, not just because it has a great ending but because it illustrates how God can work in such a situation. The culture we know best is the culture of reading—books, letters, schools, and degrees. Yes, God can use all of that, but as this first team of Bostonian missionaries found, he is not limited to the culture of literacy.

## **Leadership Training for Oral-only and Oral-dominant Societies: Reflection on Research Literature**

### **Dominant Questions**

1. Which is the most effective procedure: (a) to teach trainees to read so that they can use print-based learning procedures? or (b) to by-pass the task and effort of teaching reading and train the leaders to use oral teaching procedures instead?
2. Is it wise to put hopes in counter-cultural procedures for learning? To what extent and at what pace are the cultures of the world becoming literate? Are the Christian motives of evangelism and development of the church well served by procedures that seem retrogressive?
3. What are the leadership characteristics of non-literate leaders? What effects do non-literate leaders have upon literate followers?

### **The Stance of the Field**

Literacy is a deep and dominant aspiration among many of the world's people groups. Within the affluent nations that invest in social science, literacy is a major focal point of educational research. Most of this research is concerned with the teaching of reading the national language. Nations with multiple languages give their attention to ways and means of bringing users of other languages into the skills of the dominant or official language.

1. Far more effort is devoted to literacy education than to developing teaching skills among the non-literate.
2. Non-literate leaders are discriminated against and are deemed lacking in important skills and capabilities.
3. Very little research has explored the possibilities of effectively utilizing non-literate leaders.
4. Social research in general and educational research in particular treat the lack of literacy as a significant impairment or deficiency and put major emphasis on overcoming it.
5. The social acceptance of literacy among the international communities of major nations causes illiteracy to be treated as a social malaise and a sub-standard socio-political status. Literacy is widely regarded as a primary index of the level of development of a society.
6. These same dynamics serve to promote a nation's official language and to marginalize users of other languages within the nation. Marginalized groups that are discriminated against because of their language or dialect often become resentful to the point of belligerence.

### **Evident Biases**

Because of the situation described as "stance of the field," above, the literacy-illiteracy issue is deeply politicized and is often treated as a forbidden topic of discussion. Although renaming the issue literacy-orality is helpful, it cannot escape the assumption common in the more developed nations that literacy is the key to learning.

The avoidance of dialogue about *non-literate people as leaders* works against change in most nations. The presumption is that sooner or later everyone will learn to read and write and until that time not much can be done to evangelize non-literate persons except to make them literate as rapidly as possible.

### **Promising Research Approaches**

The relationship between intelligence and literacy is no longer convincingly predictive; literacy does not depend on intellectual competency and the lack of literacy is not an indication of low

intelligence. Historical anthropology is of some help in this matter. Although in many ancient communities the need for written communication is a common theme, especially for record-keeping and judicial affairs, human imagination and the capacity to reason and remember did not begin with reading and writing.

### **Related Fields**

Socio-linguistics has much to offer, although the special relationships between the functional issues of leaders who work without print resources and the assumptions made in educational management are complex and often ignored in the theoretical literature.

Through their work of Bible translation and dissemination, organizations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators and the various national and international Bible societies provide some of the best research sources. These groups have discovered the need to help non-literate learners become pre-literate learners. But here again, the assumption is pervasive that literacy comes first, or at least its motives come first.

## **The Prospects for Non-literate Modes of Leadership in the Emerging Christian Churches**

**The need for a new vocabulary.** The terms *illiterate persons* and *illiteracy* have a pejorative quality. They imply a fault or handicap. Note that the first syllable is “ill.” *Non-literate* and *lack of literacy* are somewhat more acceptable. But here, too, the assumptions are negative; “*non*” and “*lack*” perpetuate the assumption of a deficiency.

The shift toward using *orality* may take hold, but it sounds awkward, especially to those who are accustomed to using that word as a psychological descriptor that represents an early stage of development.

**The need for additional research.** Research tells us very little about the task of helping non-literate persons *learn*. Research insights deal commonly with the task of teaching non-literate learners how to learn *to read and write*. And we want to help them learn *to teach!* We cannot even find research that suggests whether it is more effective for literate or non-literate teachers to provide the leadership for this learning task.

**The need for new perspectives on pastoral ministry.** Given presumptions about status and highly educated meritocracy for Christian ministers, it is hard to imagine that there will be much readiness to accept church leadership as a profession for the illiterate! The widely accepted tendency toward such non-Christian characteristics as pride and fondness for intellectual attainment certainly will need to be confronted. Nothing short of taking seriously the meaning of Christian leadership as a matter of serving and accepting the worth of others will clear the way for new commitments to assist and prepare non-literate persons for leadership roles in ministry.

## The Future for Literacy in Evangelization

Evangelism is not new. God is redeeming sinful humankind; God does this through his people who bring the Gospel. The purposes of redemption are as old as Eden and its methods and means are as old as Abraham. The motives and purposes of evangelism are easily seen and understood as God's response to the sinfulness of humanity. Even as Adam and Eve discovered, the decision to displease God is as *natural* as human appetite. Human life has always included the capacity for choice and thus the freedom to sin. And because God's holiness requires repentance and restitution, every person became liable for the consequence of sin: death.

The theme that follows throughout the Old Testament is illustrated in a series of stories telling of God's efforts to redeem humankind. God provided the text of the basic laws of the moral creation. He established a nation and a land of promise for the nation, and through the covenants demonstrated his power to preserve, to rescue, and to deliver. God enabled the provisions of repentance and sacrifice in the Temple and, through a series of prophets, established the anticipation of a Savior. The fulfillment of the Old Testament examples, promises, and anticipatory provisions of restitution are brought to a focus and fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the way the Apostle Paul introduced the idea of *evangelization*, emphasizing its oral components:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' (Paul, to the Romans, 10:14,15; quoting from Isaiah 52:7 which continues as follows: ' . . . who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!''")

The steps of evangelization can be described in this way:

The teller/evangelizer is sent

To bring the *good news* of the one

Who *is* the salvation that proclaims, *your God reigns*.

The hearer/believer thus becomes the one who is saved,

A person linked forever to the one true God,

By the finished work of Jesus Christ.

To the extent that evangelization can be reduced to its "spiritual laws" or principles, this is it: *repentance*, *restitution*, and *redemption* are words associated with what is required by the righteous God as a consequence of sin. As human inventiveness and God-given creativity open new means and avenues of communication, commerce, and interchange of ideas, God's people have been empowered to employ new modes and means of communicating the Gospel message. Christians are not limited to utilizing only the ancient ways. Even God himself moved beyond the finger-on-stone technique after Sinai.

The Apostle Paul's mission to the Gentile world using the communication systems and transportation facilities of the Roman Empire illustrated how change occurs. God's ways enabled humankind's ways and thus innovation became available to assist in the spread of the Gospel. We live today within the most massive fulfillment of a global world of ideas and commerce in history. It is only fitting that we know how to use it well to the glory of God.

**Development in modern missions.** Modern mission activities commonly started by organizing churches and groups of motivated people to assume responsibility for missionary support. Taking a page from the pioneering work of the Moravians, American and Western European missionary organizations and denominational mission boards emerged and became visible in the international and intercultural work of the church early in the nineteenth century. Later in this period awareness of physical and social needs emerged. Social welfare and activity to relieve poverty and physical needs became more common—and divisive among American churches. Especially in contrast with the historic emphasis on personal salvation and the growing tendency to define evangelism in terms of *yes/no* answers to doctrinal questions, concerns for social welfare and human socio-economic needs were regarded by many Christians as alien to their godly tasks.

As we organize and manage the work of the church today, we are becoming more sensitive about the blind spots: what are we overlooking? World evangelization, in biblical terms, means “Every tribe and every nation.” That is a lot of people—and a lot of differences among those many people. Social action of various sorts has increased in recent years, and the establishment of institutions to serve various human needs has become increasingly common. There is even a new name for it: *holistic evangelization*.

Concerns for the handicapped have been rather easily overlooked among the substantial list of tasks to be undertaken by churches. This oversight persisted until well into the twentieth century. The awareness of needs and the wisdom to discern effective means to meet those needs across the world has grown slowly. As missionary efforts in evangelization have become larger and more common, Christians generally have come to a more responsive understanding of the objectives of the church. Luke’s review of Jesus’ instructions to his disciples was recognized for its underlying principle: the church is to *move outward*. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). If this passage is accepted as a procedural model, the following becomes clear:

1. *Jerusalem* was then the home base for the disciples who heard this instruction shortly after the resurrection. It was where their action started. They didn’t need to go somewhere else to communicate the gospel. They were among people they could talk with; and they knew their experiences and needs.
2. *Judea* was the district surrounding Jerusalem. Similar people, similar culture and experiences; not hard to get to, but not quite like those in Jerusalem. They could use most of what they already knew; and the habits they already had likely would work out well if they treated people politely.
3. *Samaria* is a bit of a stretch. These are people who shared much of their cultural history, but were distinctly *not* on their wavelength. Their dialect was different and they had a chip on their shoulder. The disciples would need to build new skills in interpersonal relationships as they related to them. The conceptual analogue to our own time and ministry is obvious.
4. *The Ends of the Earth*, or *uttermost parts*, as some translations state it, is the category we called *foreign missions* during the nineteenth and twenties centuries (before we realized that what is *foreign* to us is not at all foreign to them!) Going this far into regions, experiences, languages, and cultures that are different and remote from our own experience is likely to be more fulfilling and successful when some advice is accepted: *Get some experience in Judea and Samaria first*. Intercultural skills are best developed step-by-step in stages of increasing complexity. Go as a team member, not a “lone ranger,” typically beginning in conjunction with the home congregation, and then taking steps to move out in increasingly distant and difficult circles.

**The decentralizing of missions.** The past century has been a significant period for missionary effort. There are blind spots, of course, but much has been done and because of innovations in communication and educational strategies, the surges of church growth have been startling.

We can anticipate that in the years ahead evangelism will be substantially dependent on the leadership and participation of laypeople as well as pastoral leaders of the churches. We can hope that it will become more a function and responsibility of the whole body of the church. One of the reasons for this hopeful prospect is that today's populations, from early childhood forward are becoming more computer-literate and electronically facile. Electronic communication is likely to be used more frequently. Interactive uses of computer-based small-group and one-on-one applications are already becoming more common. Participation of the audience is increasing, but watching and listening still tend to predominate.

Depending on the responses to innovations in education, there are important changes ahead in the way reading is used. One area showing important evidence of this sort of change is in use of audio-visual resources to facilitate participation of handicapped people in more active ways. Although the church has long been bound up in its emphasis on print and preoccupied with the skills of reading, concern for the deaf and the blind constitutes a promising motive and arena for discovery of a more inclusive and fulfilling evangelistic ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Evangelism**

1. From literacy data around the world it is clear that if we ignore the masses of illiterate and functionally illiterate, we are severely limiting the outreach of the Gospel. What are the prospects for evangelistic outreach that deliberately extends beyond literate populations? Even among those who do come to Christ in the "literate world" there are substantial numbers who will never mature as Christians if their future depends on becoming readers first. Illiteracy is often a disqualification which must be dealt with before a person or group is deemed worthy of evangelization. What can be done to increase motivation to evangelize first and deal with literacy later?

2. One of the most predictable effects of a literacy-first approach to evangelism is the overlooking of people who cannot read. This oversight is often explained as a need to utilize means of outreach that are centered in biblical text. To what extent does this bias evangelistic outreach to exclude people who are illiterate? Because of the typically higher levels of literacy among Christian populations, especially the Bible college-educated majority of Christian missionaries, the procedures of evangelistic communication tend to reflect a strong orientation to and preference for print. What efforts would be needed to recruit or develop evangelists with skills of oral evangelization?

3. The literate sectors of modernized contemporary societies tend to set the norms for established churches. Thus the ability to read is generally assumed and is rationalized as providing the essential capability of Christians to directly inquire into the intentions of God. The Protestant ideal of understanding the Word of God for oneself, without assistance of a priest, is today curiously distorted by dependence on the print industry's bewildering variety of "Priests in Print." What would happen if Christian education were to mobilize an emphasis on teaching each Christian to tell 100 or more Bible Stories with reasonable fidelity to their Biblical sources?

4. Reading is essentially a cognitive and intellectual exercise. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is less concerned with a focus on the cognitive than with the spiritual transformation of life as a whole. Have we carefully considered that demons also believe and are not transformed by this knowledge? This should be a warning to us that the work of Christ in one's life is more concerned with doing the works of righteousness and being in a right relationship with God.

The advantages of literacy enable Christians to become more comprehensive in their effective handling of the vast lore and data of the sciences, social and physical. What should be done to cause evangelism to more thoroughly attend to the whole human condition?

5. Using the skills of literacy to continually enlarge our awareness of what God has enabled through the natural creation is a resource that contributes much to the Christian's effective use of God's revelation, through the Word and Creation. What happens when we limit our understanding of the value of literacy to establishing a relationship with God through reading the Bible?

Certainly nothing is more important than a person's relationship to God, but the person is not a disembodied spirit. What sort of help do new Christians need to make their walk with Christ more substantial and practical in their daily lives?

Those for whom reading and writing have become important tend to judge others in terms of their schooling competencies. Thus spirituality is sometimes seen as a sort of academic subject. Even one-on-one discipling is reduced to a series of knowledge-based learning exercises. What would be a better form of discipleship training?

6. Misusing literacy to foster poor educational methodology, especially the over-emphasis on telling, to the neglect of discussing and interacting so as to encourage more rigorous reasoning, may be the danger, not just the neglect of oral literacy.

Clearly, there is a literary and historical validity in oral teaching and learning that is especially useful and valid for the large sectors of unevangelized peoples; but we should be aware that history rarely runs in reverse. In a world that has made extensive use of literacy, resulting in many people becoming culturally dependent on literacy, we should make effective and attractive uses of reading and writing for the purposes literacy serves best.

The methods and means of evangelistic outreach should reflect a careful analysis of the culture and aspirations of the people who are intended as beneficiaries of the Gospel message. What are the most evident violations of this principle and how can they be corrected or avoided?