

BIBLICAL PERFORMANCE CRITICISM: AN EXEGETICAL TOOL TO ANALYZE
COMMUNICATION EVENTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the world, people have communicated orally through speech. As time progressed, communication technology advanced and began to aid oral communication to make it more accessible and permanent. The invention of the alphabet is a prime example. There is ample evidence that the New Testament authors employed writing not as the primary force of communication, but as a way to supplement the oral transmission of the biblical texts. Their use of communication technology obligates pastors and exegetes to study the Bible in light of the oral nature of communication events in the New Testament. By embracing the field of Biblical Performance Criticism and employing its methods, students of the Bible will be awarded a fuller understanding of a given text and will be more prepared to preach, teach and emphasize God's written and spoken word.

INTRODUCTION

There are communication events¹ everywhere. The father speaks to his son while they drive in the car, the jogger listens to a podcast, a woman reads her Bible in the morning over coffee. Every one of these events is a communication event because at its core, information is being communicated from one person to another. Communication events may occur through speech, audio files, and video or a written text to name a few.

There are three components to every communication event. The first component is the sender since he is “sending” the information. The second component is the message itself. The third is the channel or the medium. The medium is the method of communication that the sender employs to relay his message. For example, a medium may be visual over a computer screen, audible over a phone conversation, or as simple as a written text. Lastly, there is the receiver. The receiver is the one who “receives” the message either by listening, hearing, or watching.

While this distinction is simple, its details are vital when we consider the most important communication events that occur, the ones between God and his creation. In simplest terms, the Sender or Author of the biblical message is God. God can employ the medium of his written word through the proclamation of any person. The medium he uses could be the oral speech of a preacher, words on a page, or even the video that one watches on their phone. The receiver in this event is straightforward. Anyone who hears or listens to the word of God through any medium is the receiver of God’s word in one form or another.

¹ This term follows the definition found in Peter S. Perry, “Biblical Performance Criticism: Survey and Prospects,” *Religions* 10.2 (2019): 117, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10020117>.

Let's consider a specific communication event, for a moment. When the pastor encounters a text of the Bible, he enters a communication event. For the pastor, there are two sides of this communication event with God's word. First, God is speaking to him through his word. That much is obvious. But the pastor is also listening in on another communication event besides the one taking place between him and God. He is also listening in on the original conversation between the primary sender and the primary receiver.

Here's how. When the pastor reads an epistle in the New Testament, he is not only interacting with God's word meant for him, he is encountering a communication event as an indirect receiver. 1 Corinthians is a letter from Paul meant to praise and admonish the Christians in Corinth. The letter was primarily written for them. They are the original receivers. Yes, God directed the writing of this letter for the pastor and his people, too, but Bible students will consider the fact that they were born thousands of years later and live in a place and culture that is drastically different from the original audience.

Now consider the medium by which the message is given. To the pastor the medium is the written text. He opens his Bible to read what Paul wrote to the Corinthians. The majority of Corinthians for whom this letter was written did not receive Paul's letter via a written text² which means the communication events then were entirely different than they are now. For starters, as many as 98 percent of people were illiterate,³ and second, written manuscripts were very rare. If Paul had sent 1 Corinthians, for example, to the church in Corinth to be read the same way Christians read scripture today, we can confidently say that most of the receivers 2000 years ago

² Margaret Lee, *Sound Matters: New Testament Studies in Sound Mapping*, vol. 16 of *Biblical Performance Criticism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2018). 14.

³ Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church: Speaking, Writing, and the Gospel of Mark*, vol. 8 of *Biblical Performance Criticism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013). 6.

would have been unable to receive the message at all. An illiterate person cannot somehow absorb the meaning from the page without the ability to read. The psychological reception of God's word is crucial in New Testament communication events as well as today.

The medium employed to the New Testament's original receivers is drastically different from the medium in the pastor's study. To begin, the first-century recipients of the New Testament writings listened to an orator, or performer, who presented the letter aloud to the congregation.

Contrast that style of communication event with communication events today. Today, many Christians interact with God's word in silent readings or a quiet devotion over a computer screen. This a completely valid, but Bible students ought to acknowledge that Christians today often encounter a communication event that is entirely different than the original audience. What was once loud is now quiet. What was once communal is now mostly private. What was once the norm is now the exception.

A modern communication event between modern-day Christians and God's word is illustrated below:⁴

Author → Source Text → Translator → Target Language → Target Text → Reader

In this event the author or sender is God or his human author. The source text is copied from the manuscript which the author wrote. The translator then takes the source text and translates it into the target language which creates the target text. Then, finally, it goes to the reader. The written word is the medium by which the source text is transmitted. But of course, the reader interacts with the Bible in this type of communication event only when they pick up the Bible to read it. Compare the modern event shown above with the one below:

⁴ Perry, "Biblical Performance Criticism."

Author → Performer → Speech → Hearer

The sender would be the author in this event, while the orator or speaker transmits the message to the group. In this case, the media would be the orator and the spoken word. The receivers would be the congregation.

In both events, the receivers received the word of God. God's word is powerful enough to work through any sender or medium to reach an audience and create faith in their heart. However, a pastor would be remiss if he were to ignore the original communication events that took place in the New Testament Era.

A hermeneutical principle is to take into consideration the context of the original audience. A pastor can do that when he puts himself in the shoes of a first-century Christian who 'listens' to this letter as if he were present the first time it was read.

This paper aims to demonstrate that the pastor must have a firm grasp on communication events in the New Testament context to more effectively present gospel truths in his modern ministry context. It's through this awareness of communication events that he will be a more effective sender of God's word to his people. Below, the paper will lay the foundation of understanding New Testament communication events.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This Literature review section will inform the reader about the fields of study this paper incorporated in its quest to better understand New Testament communication events. The review portion of the paper will be divided into two main sections: 1) Biblical Performance Criticism and 2) Orality/Literacy.

Biblical Performance Criticism

Biblical Performance Criticism (BPC) is supremely helpful for the pastor when it comes to studying communication events in the New Testament. Kelly R. Iverson even suggested that the arrival of BPC onto the scene of biblical scholarship will change the way theology is done forever.⁵

From Text to Performance: Narrative and Performance Criticism in Dialogue and Debate

Iverson's book *From Text to Performance: Narrative and Performance Criticism in Dialogue and Debate* is crucial to understanding what he calls the "current paradigm shift of New Testament studies."⁶ He spends a large portion of his book discussing the nature of biblical studies today and how BPC will change the old way for the better.

⁵ Iverson Kelly. *From Text to Performance*. Vol. 10 of *Biblical Performance Criticism*. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 18.

⁶ This is the title of the first chapter in Iverson Kelly, *From Text to Performance*, vol. 10 of *Biblical Performance Criticism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014).

Iverson acknowledges the fact that many Christians today assume the written text of scripture is the primary method of interaction with scripture. While this makes perfect sense in today's era, the primary method of interacting with God's word 2000 years ago would have been much different. The common Christian would have heard scripture rather than read it. This presents a paradigm shift in one's assumptions about the Bible and how Christians communicated the truths of scripture to one another.

Iverson is adamant when he claims that this is a fundamental tenet of understanding scripture. He even claims that BPC will take biblical studies in a completely new direction. "We need to move from a literary ethos to an oral one; from silence to sound, from writing to speech; from manuscript to memory; from one fixed, original text to multiple and fluid renditions; from individual reading to embodied performance."⁷ Making this oral paradigm the new norm in biblical studies is quite a challenge and this change will not be realized overnight. Iverson acknowledges that "we have to face that many of us scholars were trained in print analysis. We know how to analyze written texts."⁸

Although the task of convincing scholars to rethink their training is difficult, Iverson thinks it is necessary. To him, approaching scripture from an oral standpoint is just that important.

This paper will not attempt to usher in a grand paradigm shift in biblical studies by introducing BPC. That's neither practical nor beneficial. Instead, this paper will attempt to put BPC in its proper place. It is not a tool that replaces normal literary exegesis, but it is a tool that supplements it. BPC brings communication events in the New Testament era to life in modern

⁷ Iverson Kelly, *From Text to Performance*. 14.

⁸ Iverson Kelly, *From Text to Performance*. 16.

contexts. It's an effective tool for the pastor, and he should know how to use it. But what exactly is it? And how do we use it?

By simply looking at the name “biblical performance criticism” it may be difficult to understand what BPC really is. The name can be confusing at first glance especially because there is already a “performance criticism” in the world of theatre.⁹

David Rhoads, the founder of www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org, has defended his use of the word “performance” in BPC.¹⁰ David Rhoads explains the word choice this way:

We have chosen this word because it covers the presentation both of stories and other kinds of writing in the Bible, such as letters, wisdom, and prophets. We have chosen it because we now know that ancient performances were not then “presentations” or ‘recitations’; they were dramatic and artful, engaging and emotional, powerful, and life-transforming.¹¹

BPC is called performance criticism to highlight the fact that communication events in the New Testament were far more than mere presentations of a biblical text. The reading of scripture in a Sunday morning church service would qualify as a presentation. Performances in the New Testament were much different. They were dynamic and lively.

BPC is far more than just a different style of delivering texts of the Bible. It's a useful tool. David Rhoads describes BPC's usefulness and function in greater detail.

Biblical performance criticism seeks to re-imagine ancient Israel and the early church as predominantly oral cultures, to construct scenarios of ancient performance as means to interpret anew the traditions of the Bible, and to reconsider the disciplines we use to study the Bible so as to take account of oral modes of analysis.¹²

⁹ David Rhoads, quoted in James Maxey and Ernst Wendland, *Translating Scripture for Sound and Performance: New Directions in Biblical Studies*, vol. 6 of Biblical Performance Criticism (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012), 3.

¹⁰ Maxey and Wendland, *Translating Scripture for Sound and Performance*. 3.

¹¹ Rhoads, quoted in Maxey and Wendland, *Translating Scripture for Sound and Performance*. 3.

¹² David Rhoads, quoted in Maxey and Wendland, *Translating Scripture for Sound and Performance*. 3.

This field offers various avenues of biblical study, but the focus of this paper aligns with the role that Rhoads gives above. Communication events in the New Testament era were simply different than they are today, so much so that a pastor cannot ignore the differences. Original receivers of a biblical text experienced the message of God's word in very different settings, through different media, and with an entirely different set of expectations than modern receivers. If a biblical student were to neglect that fact his study of the word, originally written in an oral context, would lack depth.

Biblical Performance Criticism: Survey and Prospects

In his article entitled *Biblical Performance Criticism: Survey and Prospects*, Peter Perry defines the overarching goal of biblical performance criticism that has remained the same for the last several years. "Biblical Performance Criticism is both a way to understand communication events of biblical traditions and a method for exploring meaning-making in those events."¹³ In order to use it properly and effectively, one must first gain a simple understanding of the history of BPC and how it has functioned in biblical studies for the last several years.

Perry's article lays out the history of BPC and traces its development from the early twentieth century to the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) Annual Meeting in 2021. Perry calls the first era of BPC *Biblical Performance Criticism 1.0*. He separates this first era into three movements. The first movement started in the early twentieth century. The earliest scholars began to perform what is now called BPC by distinguishing between oral and written communication. Their studies proceeded from the assumption that the ancient world primarily

¹³ Perry, "Biblical Performance Criticism," 4.

communicated in an oral culture. Perry points out that for the first time in modern history, a sharp contrast was made between oral and written cultures, and this distinction opened the door for “reconceiving how biblical texts were composed, used, and received.”¹⁴ In other words, Perry saw the division between oral and written cultures as the beginning of studying communication events in the Bible. This division between oral and written communication in the New Testament and its effects on communication will be the primary focus of this paper. There is much more to be said regarding the oral nature of the New Testament era and this certainly will be taken up later when we come across other authors who treat this matter in much greater detail in the next section of the literature review.

Perry’s article also discusses what he calls the second movement of BPC 1.0. In the late twentieth century into the early twenty-first century, BPC scholars shifted from a purely oral-versus-written-communication paradigm and began to consider communication theory as whole. The field of BPC began to consider more fully how the media changed a group’s behavior, attitude, and even values. Perry highlights that this second movement in BPC ushered in a new era of study that attempts to apply the oral and written culture paradigm to today’s biblical audience. To a large degree, this paper will rely heavily on the second movement of BPC 1.0. The second movement primarily focuses on media usage in communication events not just in the New Testament era, but throughout human history. While BPC does offer many valuable insights into this specific study of communication, this paper will leave those topics largely untouched.

The third movement in BPC 1.0 ushered in the rise of actual oral performances of biblical texts in order to attempt recreations of communication events in the first century. The trailblazers

¹⁴ Perry, “Biblical Performance Criticism,” 4.

in oral performances like David Rhodes, Thomas Boomershine, and Phillip Ruge-Jones memorize entire books of the Bible and perform them from memory. Their goal is to re-create what they think resembles the very first biblical performances as much as possible. Audience members will certainly notice the dramatic hand motions and dramatic tone of voice which are common features in their performances.

At the SBL annual meeting in San Antonio on November 20, 2021, Clifford Barbarick from Abilene Christian University preformed the book of Philippians. His presentation gave the attendees an idea of what it may have been like to be present at a New Testament communication event where an entire letter of scripture was performed to an audience with no written text before them.

This third movement in BPC 1.0 is the least useful for this paper. Oral performance of an entire book of the Bible, while it is impressive, does not seem practical for ministry today. In the New Testament, illiteracy levels among the population in the Roman world were as low as ninety percent.¹⁵ Back then, this was the only way for large portions of the church to absorb God's word. Today, literacy is much higher so people can read scripture on their own. Not to mention, this may have been the only scripture an early church had. Today, we have a full Bible of God's word so in Christian freedom and prudent wisdom, the church has decided that their weekly gatherings will be much more diverse than a reading of a single book.

In his article, Perry then moves to discuss BPC 2.0. by describing the many offshoots and specific studies of BPC that have developed over the years. He classifies BPC 2.0 into six main

¹⁵ Richard Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing*, vol. 9 of *Biblical Performance Criticism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 2.

categories that help the reader see the breadth of the field as well as the focus of this paper's study. The six categories are below.¹⁶

- 1) Describe ancient communication events
- 2) Clarify ancient media cultures
- 3) Explore the dynamics of social memory
- 4) Analyze the sound of ancient texts and their impact on audiences
- 5) Apply BPC to translation theory
- 6) Use performance as an aid for learning biblical languages.

This paper will mainly focus on categories one, two, and four since they particularly pertain to New Testament communication events, an analysis of the medium, and the impact on the audience. Those three categories will be discussed so that the Bible student's study will gain depth.

www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org

The online resource www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org is invaluable for the study of any of the six categories of BPC listed above. The purpose is clearly stated on the website. To be the online meeting place for BPC with four specific goals: 1) to promote performance criticism; 2) to report developments in this emerging discipline; 3) to be a clearinghouse for resources; 4) to provide a network for scholars and performers. Communication events in the New Testament are dissected in great detail and serve as a launchpad to other areas of study pertaining to BPC.

Many of the website's contributors have published multiple volumes of research on the topic. The Biblical Performance Series published by Cascade Books currently contains sixteen volumes on BPC. Since the series played a large role in the formation of this study, this paper will discuss some volumes from the Biblical Performance Series.

¹⁶ The list that follows is a paraphrase of Perry's original list. For a more expansive list of information and scholars pertinent to each category, see Perry, "Biblical Performance Criticism."

Biblical Performance Criticism Series

The Biblical performance book series is their lengthy discussions on the effects of BPC on Bible translation. Peter Perry has six main categories of BPC studies which are listed above. The fifth use of BPC is its application to translation theory. Those in the Bible translation field rely heavily upon and contribute heavily to BPC studies. Translators like James Maxey and E.R. Wendland show the reader how to use specific exegetical strategies helps a Bible student gain insight into the oral nature of biblical texts.

They practice translation theory with the understanding that oral communication dominated the New Testament World while written communication has dominated the world for the last several hundred years. Understanding this dynamic is essential to grasping the communication events in ancient and modern contexts.

The Biblical Performance Criticism series is necessary for this study, and puts the pastor on the right track to analyzing and breaking down communication events in the Bible. The series is at the cutting edge of BPC research and also helpfully addresses the underlying study of orality and literacy which the paper discusses below.

Orality/Literacy

The field of BPC cannot exist without the study of orality and literacy. This section is dedicated to analyzing some of the most influential contributors to this field, but certainly anyone who studies BPC will inevitably run into orality/literacy studies. The two go hand in hand.

The study of oral and written communication is surprisingly foreign for people who may not have grown up in a communication culture that is ruled by orality. Walter Ong is one of the leading scholars in the field and he discusses this point in his influential book *Orality and Literacy*.

Fully literate persons can only with great difficulty imagine what a primary oral culture is like, that is, a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even of the possibility of writing. Try to imagine a culture where no one has ever “looked up” anything. In a primary oral culture, the expression ‘to look up something’ is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might ‘call’ them back—‘recall’ them. But there is nowhere to ‘look’ for them.¹⁷

Ong illustrates the complexity of orality studies. It’s far more complicated than simply suggesting that oral cultures communicate primarily through speech and written cultures communicate through print. It’s much more nuanced because a communication culture, whether oral or written, influences much more than the style of communication. It influences one’s cognition on a deeper level.

This fact is perhaps the most influential aspect of Ong’s work in the field. Years before Ong published *Orality and Literacy*, scholars recognized the difference between oral and written communication cultures. Ong describes Ferdinand Saussure (1857–1913) as the father of modern linguistics since he was among the first to distinguish between orality and literacy. However,

¹⁷ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York, Routledge, 2012), 31.

Ong is credited with applying the oral and written dynamic to an individual's psyche. He asserted that orality and literacy affected almost every aspect of one's life.

The medium of orality, literacy or something more electronic has major implications for the ways in which people interact with one another. If Ong is correct, and many scholars operate under the assumption that he is,¹⁸ then the oral medium employed in communication events is supremely influential on both the sender and the receiver. In other words, the oral medium of scripture changes the way that the New Testament senders and receivers communicated via the word which was written for the ear.

Dennis Cali aptly describes how the medium influences both parties. He notes that "Ong explored how the dominant mode of communication of an era . . . creates in a culture a particular communication environment that shapes the way its members process information."¹⁹ In other words, the way people communicate changes how they think about any matter, not just communication but practical life situations. The complexity and the impact that a person's communication has on their brain must be taken into consideration when transmitting information to another medium.

Since the medium of communicating scripture today is significantly different than it was in the New Testament era, pastors will need understand what differences exist and how they may affect the understanding of a given text. Thankfully, Walter Ong lists basic descriptions of oral psychodynamics provide basic descriptions of the ways in which oral communication differs from modern forms of communication.

¹⁸ According to Google Scholar, *Orality and Literacy* has been cited 21,601 times since it was published in 1982.

¹⁹ Dennis D Cali, "Word and Voice in the Media Ecology of Walter Ong," *Listening* 46.2 (2011): 126–39.

In the third chapter of his book, “Some Psychodynamics of Orality,” Ong describes in basic terms how oral communication seems to function and affect both sender and receiver. Much of the descriptions below will be solid representations of communication cultures in the New Testament.²⁰

Ong describes oral “habits of knowing”²¹ which is the fundamental way oral communication affects one’s psychological makeup. There are nine “characteristics of orally based thought and expression”²² in all. His book offers in-depth descriptions and definitions of each. Still, this paper will synthesize each characteristic in a few sentences and discuss whether they apply to a pastor’s study of communication in the realm of BPC.

Additive Rather Than Subordinative

This characteristic can be summarized in one word, narration. Ong offers the creation account from Genesis 1:1–5 as an example in which “and” introduces nine separate statements. This would be considered poor writing today, but this oral characteristic found in ancient written texts is quite normal in a culture with major oral residue. To primarily oral communicators, narrative and consecutive flow of thought are the default mode of communication.

This additive characteristic will certainly show up again in this paper. It’s a key feature of orality found in many places in the New and Old Testaments.

²⁰ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 39.

²¹ Cali, “Word and Voice in the Media Ecology of Walter Ong.”

²² Cali, “Word and Voice in the Media Ecology of Walter Ong.”

Aggregative Rather Than Analytic

In oral communication, items are grouped together rather than analyzed separately. This helps with memory, for example. The oral communicator prefers “not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess not the oak, but the sturdy oak.”²³ Today, we see remnants of this style in phrases like “first and foremost,” little old lady,” or “dirty politician.”²⁴ This demonstrates that oral communicators function in very phonetically obvious structures to aid in memory. Without writing, this aggregate style of communication keeps ideas and beliefs intact.

The paper will reference memory as it pertains to communication events below. The aggregative nature of oral culture’s writing has been found to be easier to memorize. Pastor who write their sermons to be memorized and performed can attest to this. A sermon would be considered aggregative. Other scholarly writings or papers are not written to be memorized. They are written to be studied and discuss. Papers would qualify as analytic.

Redundant or ‘Copious’

In written communication today, redundancy is not desirable. In oral communication, it is necessary. Since the “oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered,”²⁵ repetition helps solidify knowledge into one’s mind. Writing does not need to employ this characteristic since the reader can refer back to the text or look up the information later.

²³ Cali, “Word and Voice in the Media Ecology of Walter Ong.”

²⁴ Cali, “Word and Voice in the Media Ecology of Walter Ong.”

²⁵ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 40.

This paper will discuss the redundant nature of New Testament writings as evidence for the oral communication setting in which they were written and performed. Authors of the New Testament wrote redundantly because they knew their letters would be performed orally to people who did have the ability to refer back to their written work. The redundant characteristic of oral communication in scripture helps the pastor note the oral qualities in scripture, and therefore help him to see the author's emphasis in a given section.

Conservative or Traditionalist

Since the spoken word vanishes in oral settings as soon as they are spoken, oral communicators tend to discuss only the things that truly matter to them. As a result, Ong suggests that oral communicators that preserve the memory of the group's history, heritage, or religion through handing down knowledge in the form of words.²⁶ As a result, oral communicators are more traditional by nature. Perusing new ideas can threaten one's memory of the past or their grasp on important learned skills. They had to be selective with their memory, in other words.

New Testament receivers came from a communication culture more closely linked with oral communication than our own. This characteristic is not addressed in this paper, but its application to modern communicators implies that it assists them to better understand the original audiences of scripture.

²⁶ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 39.

Close to the Human Lifeworld

There are no how-to manuals in oral cultures. Every bit of know-how exists in the collective knowledge of the group. That collective knowledge is mostly practical and not necessarily abstract. Ong says, “Oral cultures know few statistics or facts divorced from human or quasi-human activity.”²⁷ This characteristic is not discussed at length in this particular paper.

Agonistically Toned

Ong surmises that oral communicators are more violent or prone to struggle. This suggests that violent language or harsh words were more common to a person living in the first century than it is to us. There is language in scripture that seems harsh to modern readers, but abrasive language may not have been as noticeable to a first-century reader. This paper will discuss a few examples below.

Empathetic and Participatory Rather Than Objectively Distanced

Writing is the exercise of the individual to bring the known from the unknown whereas oral speech is more inclusive and communal. This paper will address this characteristic when it discusses communication events in the New Testament. For example, a New Testament letter was written for a specific group and it would be performed to the group. Often, the letter's main

²⁷ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 43.

purpose is to unite in a participatory manner, as Ong suggests, rather than separate people from one another unnecessarily.

Homeostatic

Written cultures have dictionaries that define the meaning of words. Oral cultures only know what the word means in the present. The meaning is determined through usage, hand gestures, and the present story being told. Meaning is never defined. It is simply understood.

This is perhaps the least useful oral characteristic for this paper. Features of the homeostatic meaning of words will not present themselves in the specific area of BPC that we will study.

Situational Rather Than Abstract

Ong describes an oral communicator as an operational thinker. They analyze situations based on their own frame of reference. He cites a case study in which illiterate and literate people were directed to look at a list of four items. From that list they were instructed to find the one item that did not belong with the other three. The list included a hammer, saw, log, and hatchet. According to an abstract view, they are all tools except the log. Therefore, the log does not belong.

However, 25-year-old illiterate man claimed the hatchet did not belong. His rationale was situational rather than abstract. He claimed that they are all tools, and the log is the material. He

concluded that if one had to go it would be the hatchet. “It doesn’t do as good of job as a saw. . . . Even if we have tools, we still need wood – otherwise we can’t build anything.”²⁸

This is just a small example which illustrates the fact that modern communicators think differently than original recipients of letters in the New Testament. This fact helps the pastor approach God’s word with the mind of someone who may think and communicate differently than he.

²⁸ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 51.

NEW TESTAMENT COMMUNICATION EVENTS

Before we dig any farther into the complexities to the New Testament communication event, it is important to define exactly what a communication event in the New Testament is. A New Testament communication event, for the sake of this paper, is considered to be the event in which the book or letter was read or preformed to the original audience of the author. The study of a communication event operates on two basic assumptions. First, there was a written manuscript that served as the strict template for the message. Second, this written manuscript was written to be spoken aloud.²⁹

Therefore, the most effective way to study the orality of the scriptures is to read the manuscript in the original language and to read it with an eye for the ear. In other words, there is not a need to replicate the New Testament event by speaking the Greek aloud, although that may very well be helpful. One can simply read the text while watching for clues of orality in the grammar and structure of the written text. In so doing, the Bible student will notice nuances and emphases that the author intended to convey in the presentation of his letter or book. These evidences of orality were a given to the original audience. They did not need to go looking for them, but it is necessary for modern readers search for oral features since they do not live in an oral communication culture.³⁰

²⁹ Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*, vol. 1 of *Biblical Performance Criticism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009). 22.

³⁰ See the appendix for a deeper dive into the evolution of communication cultures throughout the history of the church in the last 2000 years.

BPC is a crucial tool for the study of oral features in scripture. BPC “embraces many methods as means to reframe the biblical materials in the context of traditional oral cultures, construct scenarios of ancient performances, learn from contemporary performances on these materials, and reinterpret biblical writings accordingly.”³¹

The words “reinterpret biblical writings” can send off alarms since there is one basic meaning to a given text. BPC’s aim is not to find new or hidden meanings in a given text. Rather, it is the tool that helps Bible students notice features that would have been blatantly obvious to the original audience.

To know what emphases would have been obvious to the original audience, principles of BPC suggests that the communication event cannot be studied without considering the audience first.³²

Performance criticism of letter texts will therefore consider all evidence that refers to the role of the audience as recipients of the letter or that allows conclusions as to their actions during the performance. The text assumes there is an audience, and we find double evidence of this: on the one hand, when the listeners are addressed directly, and on the other hand, when the text presupposes or consciously provokes a reaction from the audience.

The text and the audience make up the communication event. To separate the audience from the text would, in essence, cancel out the communication event altogether. To analyze just the written text would be a mistake.

Furthermore, E.R. Wendland asserts that any “attentive audience in NT times, would have presumably been alert for the diverse cues and break that occur in an oral text. . . and what

³¹ Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*. 1.

³² Bernhard Oestreich, *Performance Criticism of the Pauline Letters*, *Biblical Performance Criticism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016), 89.

can we do today to promote that same level of *aural* [emphases his] perception and understanding?”³³ Inevitably, the hearing of the word was different, especially considering that the audience would rarely have the opportunity to consult the text again since they did not own their own copies. This made the communication event truly a special event with listeners who were attentive and ready to listen in order to pick up every nuance and message that the author intended to give them.

Early Christians recognized the orality of scripture and even preferred oral presentations of the word over written ones. In fact, some were even suspicious of the written texts altogether. “The later bishop Eusebius, who supplied fancy standardized copies of books in response to the emperor, remembered that Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in the early second century, ‘did not suppose that things from books would benefit him so much as things from a living and abiding voice.’”³⁴

Recitation of biblical texts and church fathers’ excerpts continued for hundreds of years and was the norm for early Christians.³⁵ For the formative years of the church, orality was the primary medium in communication events in which the gospel was preached and shared.

The modern-day pastor needs to know that orality prevailed in communication thousands of years ago. Fortunately, his training to read Greek has prepared him to see the clear evidence that the New Testament authors accommodated and employed the oral medium. The tools of BPC help him see that the orality of the first-century influenced an author’s word choice and

³³ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 51–52.

³⁴ Eusebius, quoted in Richard Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing*, vol. 9 of *Biblical Performance Criticism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 16.

³⁵ Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing*, 16

writing style, not to mention the author's emphasis on exposing the clear meaning and memorability, too. Below, this paper will examine a few examples of how biblical students can recognize the orality of scripture and how the orality of scripture influences one's reading of the text.

James

In the literature review section above, this paper discussed the psychodynamics of orality, one of which was "agonistically toned." The book of James certainly reads with an abrasive tone. This is the first clue that it is a product of orality. But there is much more. In fact, "there is little doubt that the text was meant to be presented orally to a listening audience, for its impact and appeal would be greatly diminished were it to be read silently to oneself in isolation. The text is clearly composed with an ear for aural transmission, reception, and processing."³⁶ Below the paper will discuss a few instances that E.R. Wendland would consider to be evidences of the text that is clearly composed with an ear in mind.

Structure

One of the main evidences for the orality of James is the number of directives or imperative verbs he employs. Consider the number in the first chapter alone. See the illustration below.³⁷

³⁶ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 59.

³⁷ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 62-63.

Directives by Verse
2a
4a
9-10a
12a
13a
16
19
21ab
22a
26b

Not only does the number of directives illustrate the agonistic tone of orality, it serves another purpose. It helps with memorization which extremely helpful for the performer of this letter. Here's how. Every single directive in the first chapter of James is followed by support for the directive. The following illustration indicates the support that accompanies each directive or imperative verb.

Supportive by Verse
2b-3
4b-8
10b-11
12b
13b-15
17-18
19-20
21c
22b-25
26a+c, 27

This link between directive and supportive statements highlights the close connection between the phrases in this section. The pairing would certainly have been noticeable to an aural audience which would make it a point of emphasis. Transversely, it is easy to see how a modern-day reader of this particular text could read over this directive/supportive connection with little thought.

This directive/supportive structure indicates that the content of James was not meant to be a one-time sermon. This was a message he intended his audience to remember and put into practice, but since his audience could not read, nor had access to written text, James used this pattern of speaking to solidify the information into their brains and make it easy to memorize. After all, James's goal was to actively seek change his audience's behavior. He desired to keep them from reverting back to their pre-Christian habits.³⁸ If this is the case, then this directive/supportive structure makes perfect sense.

This stylistic feature was the intentional method of James to present biblical truths. The directive/supportive structure was necessary to James's goal. "Where memory is the only or main medium for preserving information, special rhetorical codes and social conventions are required for formulating, storing and retrieving information."³⁹ Not only was this structure a necessary tactic, it was quite common. "Important teachings were told and retold in rhythmic, repetitive patterns so that students could memorize key truths."⁴⁰

This is not just true of James 1. The rhythmic oral structure remains a constant factor throughout the entire book. Consider William Lane's observation of James as a whole.

In James the voice of the writer is the voice of the speaker. It was essential to provide verbal clues to enable the audience to discern where one unit of the discourse ended and another began. These verbal clues were also necessary for the reader, because in ancient documents there was no indication where parts of a composition began or ended. This, the organization of the argument was revealed by devices such as repetition, anaphora, inclusio, responsio, parallelism, catchwords, (or "hook words") and the like. By attending to these clues, the one reading the discourse to the assembled group could give . . . [it] a

³⁸ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 64.

³⁹ Bobby Loubser, quoted by Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 62.

⁴⁰ Jones quoted in Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*.

coherent delivery. [James] was crafted not for the eye but for the ear, and its forceful, artistic prose provided the vehicle for the argument.⁴¹

Outline

For hundreds of years, scholars have struggled to make sense of James's outlines. Martin Luther determined that James had the itch to "throw things together . . . chaotically."⁴² Others suggest it has a lack of clear organization.⁴³ One commentator postulated the following thought after his literary study of James: "[James] moves quickly from topic to topic, and the logical relationship of the topics is often not all that clear. . . . The letter has no obvious structure, nor even a clearly defined theme. Moral exhortations flow closely upon one another without connections and without much logical relationship."

This assessment of James makes perfect sense when the Bible student analyzes the text from a purely literary view point. However, when the Bible student analyzes the text of James through the lens of BPC, not only do the string of moral exhortations make more sense as indicated above, the structure of the book becomes clearer, too.

While some books of the Bible are arranged in a deductive style, James's organizational style would be considered inductive.⁴⁴ The difference between the two styles of organization is apparent in James. Generally speaking, a deductive style organization would flow logically,

⁴¹ William Lane quoted by Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*.

⁴² Martin Luther quoted in Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*.

⁴³ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 79.

⁴⁴ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 81.

highlighting major themes along the path of discourse. Subpoints would be evident, and the progression of the letter or book would work toward a major theme. Inductive styles of organization do not have a steady direction of discourse nor do they work in a specific order. They are more recursive or spiral like in nature.⁴⁵ James falls into the latter category which is a style of organization that is unique from western cultures.⁴⁶ Because this type of organizational structure is uncommon in the western world, the confusion surrounding the structure of James by many commentators makes sense.

Because James falls under the inductive category of organization, the pastor will need to look for the inductive features of orality to make sense of James' structure and outline. E.R. Wendland summarizes what he has found to be indicators of orality in the outline of James. The first is the nature of opening expressions in a given section. The repeated use of "my brothers" stands out as markers of a section. They work together to provide the "compositional contours of the epistle."⁴⁷

All in all, the oral features of James work together to create the letter as an entire unit, meant to be read or heard as a whole. When all the features of orality in James work together, then the outline of James becomes clear. This is in stark contrast to the reception of books of the Bible today. In worship, the entire book is not read from the lectern. There is simply not enough time. So the pastor reads from selected passages of a given book which make the comprehension of a book's structure difficult to grasp without the context of the rest of the book.

⁴⁵ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 81.

⁴⁶ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 80

⁴⁷ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 97.

1 John

Orality is evident in every book of the Bible. The oral features discussed below are not unique to 1 John. The Bible student will find them in any book, but this paper will focus on 1 John in order to highlight some of the basic features of orality in scripture.

There are four main categories or “strategies” of the oral rhetoric in 1 John. There are 1) recursion; 2) contrast; 3) focus and; 4) mitigation.⁴⁸

Before this paper delves into the basic function of each category, consider the main goal of this particular aspect of BPC to study the oral devices in scripture.

The compositional strategies of recursion, contrast, focus, and mitigation operate together to augment the persuasive “force” of the text under the controlling direction of the Holy One. Thus, a judicious application of rhetorical technique serves to convey the intended message with greater impact on the mind, especially with regard to its main points – but also in a more appealing, hence attractive manner . . . and with increased memorability so that the basic teachings can be more readily recalled, reproduced in oral performance, and applied to one’s life. Johannine discourse is an excellent illustration of the integrated operation of these for basic functions.⁴⁹

When these strategies are read or heard, Wendland notes that a “rhetoric of reassurance” is made clear in the entire message of John. For pastors who are trained in the original languages of the Bible, the theme of reassurance is even more evident. When one can study the text in Greek, that person will hear that the text produces a “phonological manifestation of the books central truths.”⁵⁰ A simple word search will find that the word “light” appears multiple times throughout the first two chapters. From the perspective of the original audience this contrast

⁴⁸ This section of the thesis is based on Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*.

⁴⁹ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 191.

⁵⁰ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 190.

between light and darkness would have hit their ear drums time and time again, solidifying the truth that they are light. They are “walking in the light just as Jesus is in the light” (1 John 1:7). Also consider the number of times that calls his audience “my children.” He addresses them directly that way once every chapter except in the second chapter he addresses them two times by that name. The phonological manifestation of truths is evident here, simply by recursion which will be discussed below.

Recursion

The basic premise behind the recursion strategy is that the author, in this case John, repeats words as a mnemonic device. This is a strategy that he employs to signal the main point of a section to his audience. In the simplest terms, if the same word appears multiple times within a section, the pastor may consider how the original hearer may have understood that as a clue to help with understanding. Above are two clear examples but also consider that the word “seen” appears three times in the first three verses.

Wendland reminds the exegete that “it is not only quantity, or frequency of usage, that is important, but quality too.” A single word reoccurring often denotes oral features in the text. However, the pastor should also be aware of how those reoccurring words mesh with other similar words within a section. For example, while it is notable that “seen” appears three times in the first three verses of the chapter, consider the sensory illusions that are present when he employs words like “see,” “hear,” “eyes,” “hands,” and “touch.”⁵¹ The recursion of sensory words

⁵¹ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 155.

creates a theme in the mind of the reader, yes, but for the listener who is following along aurally, this recursion would be a tremendous help and provide insight into the meaning of the text.

By using sensory terms like “see,” “hear,” “eyes,” “hands,” and “touch,” this indicates to the audience that John and the apostles were not wishful thinkers when it came to their spiritual convictions. They didn’t gather in a room and make up the story of the resurrection. No, they saw Jesus with their own eyes. John heard God’s voice come from heaven and say, “This is my Son whom I love. Listen to him” (Matt 3:17). He saw the risen Jesus with his eyes, touched him with his hands, and heard God’s testimony about Christ with his own ears. The validity and the authority of his writings are apparent to the reader through the oral features present in his writing.

Another aspect of orality in John is what is known as the *inclusio* or “sandwich structure.”⁵² This is another oral feature that reduplicates words at the opening and closing of a given section.⁵³ The sandwich structure of recursion appears all throughout the book of John and helps the aural listener and the visual reader see and hear his emphases. “*And this is how we know that we belong to the truth. . .*” (1 John 3:19). – “*And this is how we know that he abides in us . . .*” (1 John 4:1).⁵⁴ Bracket structures like these permeate the New Testament and indicate the oral nature of the scriptures and highlight pockets of emphasis within a passage.

⁵² Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 158.

⁵³ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 158.

⁵⁴ Example taken from Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 159.

Contrast

To some degree, contrast could be considered an aspect of recursion much like *inclusio* is. But the contrast feature is different enough to warrant its isolated attention. Contrast is similar to recursion in the sense that related words appear together. However, they are related only in the sense that their meanings are opposite from one another.

For example, consider the contrast present in 1 John 2:9–11. “The one who says he is in the *light* but hates his brother or sister is in the *darkness* until now. The one who loves his brother or sister remains in the *light*, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But the one who hates his brother or sister is in the *darkness*, walks in the *darkness*, and doesn’t know where he’s going, because the *darkness* has blinded his eyes.”⁵⁵ The contrast between hate and love, light and darkness creates a contrast that assists the aural listener in hearing the author’s main points.

Focus

Recursion and contrast are features that exist throughout the entirety of a given book. Focus, however, is not noticeable over a long stretch of text. If the oral presenter came across these clauses, he might have seen them as indicators or cues to emphasize the following words. The phrases are emphasized in italics. In 1 John 1:3, “*That which we have seen and heard we announce to you . . .*” In 1 John 2:2, “*And he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins . . .*” In 1 John 2:5, “*The one who says that he is in the light and hates his brother . . .*” In 1 John, “*These things I wrote to you so that you might know that . . .*”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 104.

⁵⁶ Ernst R. Wendland, *Finding and Translating the Oral-Aural Elements in Written Language*, 166.

Normally, the one who reads the biblical text will hardly notice these phrases of emphasis, whereas the aural recipient would have perked his ears at the sound of these phrases which, by definition, are the essence of orality.

Mark

As is the case with the book of James, there is no end to the discussion about the outline of Mark. James M. Robinson conceded this fact when he said, “The detailed explanation of the Marcan order continues to be obscure.”⁵⁷ Paul Achtemeier agreed when he wrote that “a satisfactory solution to the problem of the outline of Mark . . . remains to be found.”⁵⁸ It seems that the only agreement among scholars concerning Mark’s outline is that there is no agreement on Mark’s outline.

As is the case with James, many scholars approach Mark’s outline with a western literary approach, the kind of unnecessary exegetical habits that BPC seeks to eliminate. The book of Mark is nearly impossible to divide deductively because there are multiple narratives happening one right after another and the outline seems like a discombobulated mess. This seemingly disorganized structure of Mark is actually a clear indication that it was written for orality, and not for literacy in the way modern readers of the Bible understand it. Again, the proof for this is found in the psychodynamics of orality presented by Walter Ong.

⁵⁷ James M. Robinson quoted in Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church*, 63.

⁵⁸ Paul Achtemeier quoted in Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church*, 64.

The book of Mark is additive by nature. the reader will come across words like “and then,” “and,” or “immediately.” The pace of the book of Mark is fast especially for those who try to follow along and track the progression of thought. The fact that Mark is additive by nature, however, does not mean it is structureless, at least for those who embrace the orality of scripture.

Controversy Stories of Mark 2:1–3:6

The succession of stories found in Mark 2:1–3:6 seems disconnected at first glance. However, when using tools found above in the section of orality in John 1, one can easily see that clear structures exist and the seemingly disconnected five stories with in 2:1–3:6 are actually connected quite closely.

This is the starting point for examining Mark 2:1–3:6. Mark 2:1–3:6 is bracketed off from the rest of the surrounding accounts. In Mark 1:45 Jesus pauses his ministry because the freshly cleansed leper had disobeyed Jesus’ command to remain quiet and not tell anyone. He ended up telling as many people as he possible could. Subsequently, Jesus was not able to enter any more towns. The regular flow of the narrative picks up again in Mark 3:7 which means that Mark 2:1–3:6 is blocked off from the rest of the book.

This pause in the general flow from narrative is not a deviation from organizational structure, but actually seems to aid in the formation of the Marcan outline. Joanna Dewey suggests that within Mark 2:1–3:1 there is a thematic chiasmic structure.⁵⁹ The order of accounts within Mark 2:1–3:6 is listed below. Consider their chiasmic formation in addition to the content of each account: A) Jesus heals the paralytic; B) eating with the tax collectors; C) questions

⁵⁹ Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church*, 54.

about fasting; B') plucking grain on the Sabbath; A') Jesus heals the man with the withered hand.

The accounts labeled "A" are about healing and they are introduced with almost identical wording.⁶⁰ A: "having entered into again" and A': "and he entered again into." Dewey also points out that both events happen indoors. The first event in a house and the second in a synagogue.⁶¹ The accounts labeled "B" are about eating. The one labeled "C" is about fasting. The connection between the three is fairly simple. Both A and A' are miracles which bracket the entire section. Likewise, both B and B' are meals which bracket event "C." Event "C" of course is the highlight of this section. Jesus's authority is challenged, but he proves his authority.

This entire section of five accounts is closely connected, proved by the chiastic structure. The principles of BPC suggest that this structure is anything but accidental. Mark compiled the accounts and fashioned them in such a way to make the performance of Mark easier for the performer and equally easy for the audience to remember. Without the emphasis on structure for the sake of memory and presentation, this section would be a collection of accounts with little organization that is hard to follow or understand.

BPC the Tool

There is a plethora of examples of orality in scripture that BPC is primed to discover, but this extensive study goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, a pastor with training in the biblical languages is already trained to continue this study and find the oral features of the scriptures and apply them to his work.

⁶⁰ Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church*, 54.

⁶¹ Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church*, 54.

Literary analysis and conventional exegesis are still the bread and butter of a pastor's textual study, but the ability to recognize recursion, contrast, focus, or chiasmic structures helps the pastor recognize the oral world in which this book or letter was written. That is the practice of BPC.

In the modern era, Christians will continue to read the scriptures by themselves or in a group, which is perfectly acceptable and encouraged, but the ability to recognize the psychodynamics of orality prepares the pastor to recognize the oral world in which the Bible was written. BPC helps the pastor to ask himself in his study of a text, "What did this sound like to the very first hearer?" And in answering that questions, certain nuances and meanings that were not present earlier may arise. That's the practice of BPC

Consider a short anecdote from the Gospels. Matthew and Mark record the account of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah. Luke does, as well, but Matthew and Mark tell the readers what happened shortly after Peter's bold confession. Jesus accepted the confession of Peter only to describe what gruesome things would happen to him. Peter objects to Jesus's prediction because the death of the Messiah went against everything he believed. Jesus then responded with his famous rebuke, "Get behind me Satan."

It's a jarring phrase that many Christians today seem to latch onto. It is a firm yet startling statement for Jesus to call one of his twelve disciples, the leader no less, Satan. But is this statement really as jarring as people make it out to be? Consider the psychodynamics of orality as Walter Ong described them. One feature of orality at play here is that oral cultures are "agonistic in tone." This is violent rebuke to modern ears but it may not have been nearly as jarring to the first-century listeners. Perhaps it was expected.

To be sure, the meaning of this statement does not change. What Peter said was certainly devilish talk meant to derail Jesus's mission as the Messiah who would die for all people. However, while the meaning stays the same, our recognition that the agonistic tone was natural to the first-century listeners may change what we emphasize about the statement. Because this is a startling comment, many preachers today may be tempted to overemphasize the comment. But BPC tells the Bible student that while Jesus's rebuke of Peter was firm, it is not the main point of emphasis in this section. It was simply the way people spoke. BPC helps to place the Bible student in the aural world of the text so he may study scripture's immediate context all the more.

CONCLUSION

Consider trying to carry out gospel ministry in a context where only two percent of your community was literate. Would it be possible? How would ministry change? How would life be different? By now, the reader recognizes that this literacy situation was reality for the early Christian church. But somehow, it wasn't a hindrance to ministry. The church exploded throughout the entire world, all without printing presses and publishing houses. Their ministry tool was the word of God. They didn't pass out printed Bibles, they performed it orally.

This fact is made clear through the studies of BPC. The study of New Testament communication events through the lens of BPC helps pastors recognize not just the oral atmosphere in which the scriptures were communicated, is also helps them to recognize the orality of the scriptures themselves.

In the introduction of this paper the reader analyzed a modern communication event as it normally occurs today. See it again below:

Author → Source Text → Translator → Target Text → Reader

While this communication event is necessary for Bible translations, consider the number of points of contact that exist between the author and the reader today. There are five in all. And often the reader is so far removed from the oral context, which makes it nearly impossible for the common Christian to recognize the orality of the God's word.

Now consider again the communication event as it is described from a New Testament communication event point of view.

Author → Performer → Speech → Hearer

Not only are there fewer points of contact, the author wrote with the ear in mind, and the hearer heard what the author wanted them to hear. The connection between the audience and the message giver is closer. Through the study of BPC, the pastor can recognize orality and bring the oral shading of the text to his hearers. This will eliminate unnecessary points of contact in the pulpit. After a BPC-oriented study of a text, a modern sermon communication event could look more like the latter event than the former. Of course, the message would be the same, but the oral nuances will remain, their emphases will be embraced, and the spoken will be preached all the more clearly and faithfully.

APPENDIX

History of Communication and Media in the Bible and Early Church

The history of communication in the church can be traced alongside the development of writing and print in media.⁶² In his article “Why Everything We Know About the Bible is Wrong”, Robert Fowler explains why how tracing the development of media in the Bible is necessary. Ancient biblical media is drastically different than the media we use today.

Because we have been reading the Bible in print for 500 years, we naturally assume that that is the way people have always experienced the Bible. But that is not the case: for 2500 years prior to Gutenberg, most people experienced the Bible either through oral/aural performance or in the form of unique and rare hand-written manuscripts. If we want to understand how the contents of the Bible were first experienced and understood by ancient Jews and Christians, then we need to gain an understanding of the media history of the Bible prior to Gutenberg.⁶³

To more easily trace the development of media in the history of the church, this appendix will divide the history of communication and media into four eras:⁶⁴ 1) primary oral communication; 2) manuscript communication; 3) print communication; 4) electronic/secondary communication.

⁶² J. A. (Bobby) Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible: Studies on the Media Texture of the New Testament - Explorative Hermeneutics*, vol. 7 of *Biblical Performance Criticism* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 18.

⁶³ Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*.
5.

⁶⁴ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

Primary Oral Communication

Oral communication is widely regarded as the most fundamental of all types of communication. An oral culture in its purest form will function entirely without any writing at all. As a result, oral cultures would need to “preserve all their knowledge without writing or any other system of record keeping. They often use pictorial systems, but at best these serve as memory aids to help in the oral recall of the material.”⁶⁵

Every culture needs to retain its identity somehow. In written cultures, people preserve history and identity through the production of manuscripts. There were men whose entire livelihood was centered around preserving history. Names like Suetonius, Tacitus and Josephus, come to mind.

In a primary oral culture, identity is preserved in memory. Therefore, it is necessary for oral communicators to say and think memorable things.⁶⁶ According to Walter Ong, the copious repetition of content is a major mark of oral communication since it aids the ability to memorize.⁶⁷ Because memory is crucial to identity, oral communicators are more repetitious and communal by nature. It is easier to remember important skills and stories with the help of an entire village than it would be if someone were to do it alone. Soukup notes,

Collective recitation adds more resources still: should one person forget a phrase, a neighbor will recall it. (Even literate cultures experience this in the collective recitation of complex prayers like the Nicene Creed.) Repetition and restatement in various ways helps recall: if one forgets a part of the structure, the other part remains.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Paul A. Soukup, “The Structure of Communication as a Challenge for Theology,” *Teología y Vida* XLIV (2003): 102–22.

⁶⁶ Soukup, “The Structure of Communication as a Challenge for Theology.”

⁶⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 40.

⁶⁸ Soukup, “The Structure of Communication as a Challenge for Theology.”

Memory is key, and if an activity does not aid memory, it will likely be pushed aside. It just so happens that communal activities are highly conducive to memory. If everyone tells the same stories and learns the same way by listening to the same people then their memory and their identity is intact.⁶⁹

Indeed, speaking the same stories, lessons, and skills are important in a primary oral culture since it solidifies the group into a solid whole, but equally important is the practice of listening together. The aural aspect of primary oral cultures also brings the individual into the communal.

There are sociological and psychological factors to listening that greatly impact the group, too. A communication event with a group of people is powerful. When people hear a biblical message together, “the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors, as persons, the spoken word from human beings into close-knit groups. When a speaker is addressing an audience, the members of the audience normally become a unity, with themselves and with the speaker.”⁷⁰ This has major implications for the New Testament writers. The New Testament writers and audiences fall into the second category, manuscript communication. However, these distinctions have blurry lines. The invention of the printing press, at least in the beginning, served to aid the transmission of oral communication, not replace it.

⁶⁹ Soukup, “The Structure of Communication as a Challenge for Theology.”

⁷⁰ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 73.

Manuscript Communication

Manuscript communication, or writing, took place at different times and at different stages in the ancient world, but there are a few main systems of writing that have heavily impacted communication in the world's history.

The earliest forms of writing can be traced back to Egypt and Mesopotamia in 2800 BC. The hieroglyphic system was highly sophisticated and was legal or historical in nature. Scribes would be commissioned to write for specific purposes. It was a cumbersome process that was designated for a few select individuals who would record information and they would consider it stored memory.⁷¹

It wasn't until the second millennium BC that the modern alphabet was invented somewhere in the middle East and brought to the rest of the world by the Phoenicians.⁷² Still, at this point the practice of writing was designated to select few. This manuscript culture was reserved only for the elite or highly educated. Even those who were literate, which made up between two and four percent⁷³ of the population in the first-century, were still oral communicators. Their writing was an aid to oral communication for their communal group or nation-state.

⁷¹ J. A. (Bobby) Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in The Bible*, 20.

⁷² Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*, 9.

⁷³ Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church*, 23.

The invention of writing slowly began to take on newer and more efficient forms. Egypt began using more sophisticated script that resembled an alphabetic form.⁷⁴ There is evidence that scribal and manuscript cultures had spread to all parts of the middle east.

Perhaps the most innovative technological invention that changed the manuscript culture was the invention of the Greek alphabet. The Semitic languages gave way to an alphabet that consisted of only 24 letters which included consonants *and* vowels. The inclusion of vowels is key. This allowed scribes to record speech to writing, at least on a surface level. The sounds that come out of a person's mouth can be recorded, but not his facial expressions for example. It was the first time that a complete phonetic code was invented for a language.⁷⁵ In a sense, the Greek alphabet became the first voice recording device since it gave the ability to record thoughts and ideas and voice and sound for the readers in a way that has never been seen.

Alphabets and writing had been in use for thousands of years before Christ, yet in the first century, much of the communication was still highly oral. There exists a modern aspiration to achieve literacy throughout the world which makes it difficult to imagine what a thousands years of illiteracy for the majority of people might look like.⁷⁶ Even in the first century, when the Bible was being recorded on manuscripts, only the elite were literate while the masses could not read.

Although it was reserved for the elite, the alphabet and writing are considered a technology that greatly impacted society. The ancient technology of the alphabet was met with resistance, however. As some people push back on the inclusion of computers or smartphones

⁷⁴ J. A. (Bobby) Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in The Bible*, 23.

⁷⁵ J. A. (Bobby) Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in The Bible*, 22.

⁷⁶ Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*, 9.

into today's society, some influential people in Greece resisted the advancement of manuscript culture, namely, the alphabet and the practice of writing things down. Plato predicted how profound words and writing would be for one's ability to learn and communicate. He claimed that those who write down information lose the capacity to remember anything at all. Manuscripts and those who employ them will lack internal resources to remember because they rely on external resources for memory.⁷⁷ He warned against what he assumed was the most significant danger to society, manuscripts. Plato warned that "the new arrival of writing would revolutionize culture for the worst. He suggested that it would substitute reminiscence for thought and mechanical learning from the true dialect of the living quest for truth by discourse and conversation."⁷⁸ Much like today's technology, from calculators to simply googling information on an iPhone, the medium has consequences.

The biggest downside to writing, Plato says, is that it is dead. He likens writing to a painting. If you were to ask a painting to give its opinion or discuss important topics, it would not be able to do it. So also with writing. A person can write something down, but the manuscript, Plato says can't be a source of knowledge because it cannot converse with the student. If a person explains a statement, one can expect a response and ultimately arrive at some sort of clarity. However, when you ask a manuscript for clarification, you hear crickets. You get "nothing except the same, often stupid, words which called for your question in the first place."⁷⁹

It must be stated that the advancement of manuscript communication was a good thing for society. This paper is not advocating the removal of writing. Plato certainly does effectively

⁷⁷ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 78.

⁷⁸ Eric McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan* (Basic Books, 1996), 42.

⁷⁹ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 78.

argue that the medium of written text has profound impacts on cognition and communication. However, his argument is flawed to some degree since he employed the very medium that he despised in order to make his argument. He used a manuscript to promote his idea that manuscripts were dangerous.

Walter Ong began to discuss the dangerous relationship between technology and the medium of communication. When technology advances, he asserts, it often has effects far beyond what people could have imagined.⁸⁰ Sometimes those effects are beneficial, other times they are detrimental. In Plato's case, he warned against the detrimental, but could not see the benefits. Yes, words and writing change the way we speak, but through written words, we can glean wisdom from Plato. If it weren't for writing, his ideas would surely be lost. There exists, then, a paradoxical relationship between the beneficial and detrimental effects of technology and media.

Ong asserts that once a new form of media arrives, it will always be present. This is the example he uses.⁸¹ Imagine someone were to speak out against the dangers of computer technology on today's society. The most effective way for them to get this message out would ultimately be through a computer since it is already the preferred means of the culture's communication. It is true that he advocate may use books, podcasts, or the radio, but all of these media rely on the computer to some degree. "Once the word is technologized, there is no effective way to criticize what technology has done with it without the aid of the highest technology available."⁸²

⁸⁰ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 81.

⁸¹ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 79.

⁸² Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 79.

Manuscript culture depended on the invention of writing. But it took thousands of years for the masses to utilize writing in the way we do today. For thousands of years, the manuscript culture remained reserved for the elite. It just wasn't a practical form of communication for the masses.

Manuscripts never were meant to become a common form of communication, though. Instead, manuscripts supplemented communication and were meant to enhance oral communication by solidifying speech in a written form. It recorded teachings, sayings, and histories. It did not make the great leap from oral to written. The communication era that precedes manuscript culture, does.

Print Communication

While manuscript culture aided oral presentations, the print era essentially replaced oral communication cultures. With the invention of the printing press, communication went from sound-based to visual-based.⁸³

Robert Fowler points out that print culture is familiar to us so people hardly stop to think about it.⁸⁴ The impacts of the printing press are not on the forefront of our minds, although this invention has changed the course of history and human communication more than we could ever imagine.

⁸³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 4th ed. (Berkeley, CA: Ginko, 2017), 116.

⁸⁴ Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*, 12.

For example, “when we think of the Bible, we think of the printed Bible, but we are often oblivious to the lessons that the use of the printed Bible teaches us.”⁸⁵ Below is a list that encapsulates all of the ways in which the printing press and print culture in general has affected the world.⁸⁶ 1) With the mass production of cheaper books, widespread literacy at last became both imaginable and achievable. 2) Printing provided the technology necessary to better preserve old knowledge, to correct mistaken knowledge, and to expand new knowledge. 3) Thus, the printing press served to spark the development of modern scientific and historical investigation. 4) It also promoted cultural and religious ferment, such as with the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. 5) It encouraged the use of vernacular European languages, and it led to the standardization of these languages. 6) With the promotion of vernacular languages, nationalistic identities were encouraged.

Not all of these items in the list pertain to this paper’s focus, but their inclusion illustrates the widespread influence of print culture, not just in biblical studies, but in all matters of life and ways of thinking.

None of these six events listed above could have taken place in an oral culture or manuscript culture. There are two reasons for this. The first reason is technological. It was virtually impossible to share ideas and promote human progress when scribes were tasked with the mundane process of recording information by hand. The second reason is psychological. An individual in an oral culture who operates along the lines of Ong’s list of oral psychodynamics

⁸⁵ Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*, 12.

⁸⁶ Elizabeth L. Eisenstein’s list is quoted by Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*, 13.

would not be able to conceive of these grand tasks. A world view based on orality and manuscript culture would not accommodate for the changes that came from the printing press.

A great shift in communication took place with the onset of oral communication. Even more so, though, was a colossal shift in the human mindset. Below this paper spoke against Walter Ong's great divide which theorized that oral communication and print communication were vastly different. Instead there seems not to be a great divide in communication, but a great divide in psychology and thought. That is how powerful a medium can be. William Graham puts it this way:

The major displacement of thought and communication came only as a post print phenomenon . . . In terms of changes in modes of consciousness as well as sheer material change, the great [divide] in forms of communication turns out to be not that between literate societies and nonliterate societies but . . . the gulf between our own modern Western, post-enlightenment world of the printed age and all past cultures.⁸⁷

The age of printed media ushered in complete shifts in cultures. Never before has the world seen such a dramatic change in communication until this modern age. Just as the printing press has major implications in communication and culture so does the modern era of electronic culture.

Electronic Communication

Electronic communication is found in the present age, and there is no one form of electric communication. There are many. Electronic communication could take place over the medium of a cell phone, laptop, radio, or television, and the list could go on and on. It's important to note that while electronic communication is relatively new, it still employs forms of communication that were present in every age of communication. "When new communication comes along, the

⁸⁷ William Graham quoted in Joanna Dewey, *The Oral Ethos of the Early Church*, 36.

old media does not vanish.”⁸⁸ When writing was invented, speaking did not cease to exist. When the printing press was developed, people did not stop writing by hand. Instead, when a new medium arises, it presents an entirely new set of options for communication and media.⁸⁹

Electronic communication has done just that.

While there is a clear progression of communication history in the church, all forms of communication are accumulative. One cannot function, nor exist without the other. Just because one form of communication dominates in this era does not mean that media from the past do not play a role in communication today. It’s this principle that allows the pastor to study new Testament communication events and apply the word to his modern ministry context while using completely different media.

In order to illustrate the power of the electronic medium, consider an example from *Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible*. The author, Bobby Loubser, whose book applies McLuhan’s principle to New Testament studies and hermeneutics, notes that the medium is bound to change the message, especially in the realm of biblical studies.⁹⁰ Consider Mary Magdalene’s transformation in the past century due to the evolution of electronic media.

In oral-manuscript culture, as also in the succeeding printed media, characterization of her remained relatively stable. However, a significant transformation occurred when the Gospel narrative was transposed to the film medium. Initially portrayed as follower of Jesus, she increasingly became his sexual counterpart and fleshly temptation. This development can be consistently traced in the long-range of successive Jesus films since the 1920s. The manuscript gospels do not provide any evidence for this development so that it can be ascribed to the demands of the cinema for dramatic characterization and conflict.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*, 13.

⁸⁹ Holly Hearon and Phillip Ruge-Jones, *The Bible In Ancient And Modern Media: Story and Performance*, 13.

⁹⁰ J.A. (Bobby) Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in The Bible*, 4.

⁹¹ J.A. (Bobby) Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in The Bible*, 4.

The medium cannot be considered a neutral force in communication. Electronic communication events hinge on the use of the medium.

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