



ORAL TRADITION

Festschrift for John Miles Foley

This article is one of a series of short essays, collectively titled “Further Explorations,” published as part of a special issue of *Oral Tradition* in honor of John Miles Foley’s 65th birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John’s tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).

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Communication Then and Now

Bruce E. Shields

Characteristics of Ancient Oral Communication

Walter Ong frequently discussed the various characteristics of communication commonly found within primary oral cultures. In his essay “African Talking Drums and Oral Noetics” he lists some of these characteristics (1977:92-120):

1. Stereotyped or formulaic expression
2. Standardization of themes
3. Epithetic identification for disambiguation of classes or individuals
4. Generation of heavy or ceremonial characters
5. Formulary, ceremonial appropriation of history
6. Cultivation of praise and vituperation
7. Copiousness

A few years later, in a discussion of the “psychodynamics of orality” (1982:37-50), Ong contended that “in a primary oral culture, thought and expression tend to be of the following sorts” (37):

1. Additive rather than subordinative
2. Aggregative rather than analytic
3. Redundant or copious
4. Conservative or traditionalist
5. Close to the human lifeworld
6. Agonistically toned
7. Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced
8. Homeostatic
9. Situational rather than abstract

With reference to biblical material in particular, Vernon K. Robbins acknowledges the important contributions of Ong and his successors, but insists that both Ong and Werner Kelber dwell too heavily in their early work on the differences between oral and written communication. These differences were central to Kelber’s (1983/1997) argument that Mark, presumably the earliest of

the gospels, changed the nature of the message of Jesus simply by writing it down.¹ For instance, in his critique of a related work by Robert Fowler (1991), Robbins writes (1996:50-51):

First, Fowler's perception of the cultural context for first-century texts is based on the dichotomy between oral culture and literate culture (i.e. print culture) perpetuated by Walter Ong and Werner Kelber (Fowler 1991:51-2). The problem with this approach, as I perceive it, is that early Christianity did not emerge either in an oral or in a literate culture, but in a rhetorical culture. . . . A rhetorical culture is aware of written texts, uses written and oral language interactively and composes both orally and scribally in a rhetorical manner. Mark did not write, as Fowler following Kelber asserts, 'to bring the spoken word under control, to domesticate it and replace it with his own written version of *euangelion*' (Fowler 1991:51). Rather, in his rhetorical culture, Mark sought to give word its *full rhetorical power by embodying it in both speaking and writing*. In antiquity a written text did not imprison words. Written texts were simply an additional tool to give language power. . . . (emphasis in the original)

Robbins goes on with his criticism, but this passage will suffice to introduce the next author on our radar.

Characteristics of Jesus' Communication

William Brosend leans heavily on the work of Robbins. In his recent book, *The Preaching of Jesus*, Brosend lists four important characteristics of Jesus' preaching (2010:23-26):

1. Dialogical
2. Proclamatory
3. Occasionally Self-referential
4. Persistently Figurative

Brosend's list corresponds well with my own findings, though I contend that the orality approach and the rhetorical approach should not be viewed as mutually exclusive. In fact, there is enough overlap between Brosend's list and the ones given above from Ong's work that we can recognize them as related, noting that Brosend is simply focusing on the rhetoric of the synoptic gospels while Ong focuses on the (from our point of view) peculiarities of communication in a primarily oral culture. Understanding that difference, we can then use a combination of both approaches as a framework by which to compare communications in the first century with those of our contemporary culture in postmodern society.

Brosend's "dialogical" category relates to several of Ong's characteristics, especially those labeled "empathetic and participatory" and "situational." By "proclamatory" Brosend means essentially what Walter Wink (1998) refers to as Jesus' resisting "the Powers That Be." He

¹ Kelber softens his approach somewhat in the second edition (1997:xxi-xxvi), but he maintains his contention that Mark's writing is more than a recording of oral communication.

rejects the terms “provocative” and “prophetic” as having become too negative in contemporary usage, yet he wants to describe Jesus as being clearly counter-cultural at times. This proclamatory nature for Jesus’ preaching thus parallels Ong’s “epithetic identification for disambiguation,” as well as his “cultivation of praise and vituperation” and his “agonistically toned.” On the one hand, Brosend’s “occasionally self-referential” seems to me to be a peculiar characteristic of Jesus in the synoptics, so we need not look for direct parallels. On the other hand, noticing this characteristic reminds us that Jesus and his earliest followers were more concerned with the subject matter of their proclamation than with their own personal stories.² Finally, Brosend’s “persistently figurative” characterization emphasizes Jesus’ use of analogies and stories to make his points. This usage corresponds nicely to Ong’s understanding of primary oral thought processes tending toward being “aggregative rather than analytic,” “close to the human lifeworld,” and “situational rather than abstract.”

A good example of all of these noted characteristics is found in Matthew 24 and 25, much of which is paralleled in Mark 13 and Luke 12, 17, 19, and 21 as well. Though it remains uncertain as to how much of the wording and context of such passages we can trace back to Jesus, whether we credit the passage to Jesus or to the gospel compiler/redactor, the categories of Brosend and their parallels in Ong are well represented. Matthew 24:1 indicates the dialogical nature of the communication, since the whole passage begins with a trip to the Jerusalem temple with his disciples who marvel at the buildings. Jesus then warns them that this will all “be thrown down” in the coming day of judgment. The rest of the conversation then takes place on the Mount of Olives, opposite the temple, when the disciples ask him directly when his coming in judgment will be (Matthew 24:1-3):³

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, “You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?”

The rest of the passage is proclamation, using rich figurative language with only indirect personal references. Most of the self-references are to “the Son of Man,” a formulation that originated with the Hebrew prophets and was apparently often used by Jesus to refer to himself. Jesus actually quotes Daniel 7:13 in Matthew 24:31 concerning the coming of the Son of Man, and in fact Matthew 24:4-31 includes several additional quotations and echoes of various prophets.

Then come the direct warnings to be ready. In these admonishments Jesus uses a great variety of metaphors, similes, and parables. He begins with the example of the fig tree (Matthew 24:32-35) as follows:

² Such self-referentiality has commonly been viewed as important in many oral traditions, both on the level of performance (for instance, as a disclaimer or an appeal to tradition [cf. Bauman 1977:21-22]) and with respect to the meaning-creation process (see, for example, Foley 1991 on the metonymic nature of traditional referentiality, a process that often employs self-referential loops).

³ All quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Then he continues with the stories of Noah and the flood (24:36-39), the master and his slaves (24:45-51), the bridesmaids at a wedding (25:1-13), the master who entrusts a fortune to three slaves (25:14-30), and finally the picture of the separation of sheep from goats as the final judgment (25:31-46).

In addition to Brosend's four categories, we can also easily identify all of Ong's sixteen (albeit overlapping) categories in these two chapters. For instance, there are certainly many stereotyped or formulaic expressions, and there is no doubt about the distinction between the good and the bad, made clear at least partially by the generation of heavy characters. There are agonistic scenes, prophets present formulas from history, there is much praise and vituperation, and the lessons are clearly stated repeatedly over several instances. And all of this appears within two modest chapters.

The Postmodern Listener

One might expect that after two thousand years the reception of oral communication would have changed radically, but that does not seem to be the case. The increasingly common literacy of the past three centuries certainly marked a change, as people spoke and listened more attuned to visual words on a page than to spoken words received through the ears. However, what Ong has called "secondary orality" (1982:11, 133-34) has shifted the communication situation again, with the dominance of television, film, and computer screens and their use of images and narratives to communicate more directly to the emotions. So what can we learn from the ancients for effective communication today?

I find that postmodern philosophy is far removed from the way most postmodern people live their lives. Therefore, I tend to tie an understanding of communication in our age to the way people deal with life and not strictly to the work of philosophers themselves. I proceed with the following list of filters that I feel are most commonly employed in our culture today:

Pluralism: It's all around us. Nobody lives in a totally homogeneous society anymore. This means that we cannot assume that hearers of preaching share the faith or worldview of any given preacher. Such pluralism is certainly what the early Christians faced, surrounded as they were by several kinds of Judaism, as well as pagan worship and mystery religions.

Questions about truth: Such questions appear quite frequently since postmoderns are often leery of anybody who claims to have final answers to anything. Many postmoderns hold very strong views on these matters but practice broad tolerance for contrasting views held by others.

Search for authenticity: What these seekers look for is authenticity. They want to know what difference a viewpoint makes in the life of the one who holds it. Jesus and his followers

gained enough respect to be heard by showing in their lives the ethical standards of their teaching. (Cf. Acts 2:43-47.)

Yearning for real community: Following the philosophy that all language is developed in and by its community, postmoderns yearn for authentic community, where they can see lives corresponding to linguistic claims and a group holding strong convictions without being judgmental.

Finally, now that we have taken a look at the preaching of Jesus in light of the research of Ong and Brose and have added to that the four filters suggested above as relevant to today's society of "secondary orality," we now can take away four lessons for those wishing to communicate effectively about religious issues today:

1. Humility is fundamental. Except for the few who yearn for the security of a rigid legalism, people today will not listen long to a preacher or anyone else who claims or even appears to claim to have all truth. In many cases, then, the communication model of confession⁴ will thus fit nicely, since it is heard not only as one option among others but also as the option chosen by the community to which the preacher belongs.

2. Dialog or conversation is vital. This speaks to the postmodern humility *vis-à-vis* truth and also the postmodern desire for community. As Jesus began with the familiar and proceeded to the more difficult ("You have heard . . . , but I say . . ."), so should contemporary preachers be in dialog with listeners.

3. Proclamation is still needed, but it should be addressed to the powers that intimidate and manipulate people, even when those powers are dear to them. Authenticity means treating everybody and every institution the same as regards the standards of the ancient faith. None should escape prophetic scrutiny.

4. Figurative or visual language reaches out to people who are conditioned to receiving most of their information through a television or computer screen. Since much of the Bible is narrative, and since Jesus taught with parables, and since the core of the Christian confession is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, visual language is not just a helpful medium; it is part and parcel of the message.

Conclusion

As a teacher of preachers I am always on the lookout for changes in the communication situation. I have lived long enough to have seen such a change in society from modern to postmodern, which has stimulated a corresponding change in preaching from deductive to inductive. The inductive approach is more akin to that practiced by the earliest Christians and apparently by Jesus himself. The picture is not yet complete, but it should be clear enough to indicate that the communication strategies of the first century, whether analyzed as orality or rhetoric, still fit nicely with the communication needs of the twenty-first century.

Emmanuel Christian Seminary

⁴ This rhetorical approach is argued thoroughly and effectively by David J. Lose (2003).

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