AN INTRODUCTION TO ORAL HERMENEUTICS

A Paper

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**1. Introduction, thesis and overview of paper.**

Eight years ago, I began a journey – a journey of bringing people from a very different culture together with a Book that was written to people from still another culture, and another time in history. Although I’ve been studying the Bible since my days in college, and then seminary, and then for twelve years in the pastorate, yet all my education and experience were along one path, one flavor, one style of hermeneutics. Western, textual, literary, linear hermeneutics dominated my way of understanding Scripture. Eight years ago, I began to work with pastors who were not trained in Western, literary styles of learning, who did not understand textual hermeneutics or linear thought patterns. Pastors in East Africa were predominantly oral learners, circular in their thought patterns, and didn’t know hermeneutics from a hole in the wall. The past eight years have challenged me to look beyond my preferred styles and methods to see other ways of understanding God’s Word.

The purpose of this paper is to introduce and explore a relatively new and unexplored method or style of hermeneutics, that of oral hermeneutics. Although I will only begin to explore this subject, it is my hope that this paper will lead to much more investigation toward better equipping our non-Western brothers and sisters to handle God’s Word well. It also should be admitted that this is a work in progress, and that it is the plan of this writer to continue researching this issue, perhaps leading to the writing of a dissertation on the subject. The thesis of this paper is that we in global training spheres must move beyond Western, textual hermeneutics to include oral elements in training pastors how to understand God’s Word. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that even in the West, people are becoming much more oral, aural, visual, digital and non-literary in their preference for learning style, and so some of the principles presented in this paper will be applicable even in Western contexts. It is my belief that there must be a balance between textual and oral hermeneutics to have a full, holistic, contextually-relevant understanding of Scripture. Both sides of the coin are desperately needed and equally relevant in global contexts. As we integrate both styles of hermeneutics, dealing with the written, textual understanding and dealing with the oral components of understanding, the result will be a deeper insight into Scripture, as it was intended for original recipients and applicable for us today.

The structure of this paper will include the following components:

1. Introduction, thesis and overview of paper.

2. Definitions and initial exploration into relevant issues.

* Hermeneutics
* Textual (literary, Western) hermeneutics
* Oral hermeneutics
* Orality
* Narrative (metanarrative, Grand Narrative)
* Narrative hermeneutics
* Neopentecostal hermeneutics
* Cultural hermeneutics
* Homiletics
* Exegesis and exposition
* Contextualization

3. A brief treatment of Scriptural transmission and orality.

4. The relationship between hermeneutics and homiletics.

5. Global and practical applications related to hermeneutics.

6. Final thoughts.

7. Working resource list for further study.

In a disclosive statement related to training global pastors in hermeneutics, Larry Caldwell (1999) shared:

“...I diligently taught my students the ‘proper’ methods of Bible interpretation and they just as diligently wrote down and memorized everything I said. I taught them the finer point of Bible interpretation, from initial exegesis to sermon preparation. Several of my students did surprisingly well in class. Most struggled. And then, on the weekends, I would accompany them to their rural church field education assignments and listen to them preach in their churches. Here was my chance to observe them putting into practice what they had so painstakingly learned in my classroom. Or so I thought. In stark contrast to the exegetically correct and logically constructed three-point sermons they had prepared in class, what I heard were sermons full of allegories and folksy illustrations, with a story-line that seemed to run circles around a loosely constructed main point. They were exegeting the Bible in ways that would earn them a failing grade in the classroom. I was one disconcerted hermeneutics professor.”

As much as many of us would echo Caldwell’s sentiments, my sincere desire is that through the investigation in this paper, and the implementation of principles that arise from it, those of us who train pastors globally will move from disconcerted to enlightened toward becoming more effective in our God-given task.

I am indebted to Rev. Al Lewis and Dr. Tom Steffen as I have been on this journey. Al Lewis has helped guide my understanding of the importance and critical need for Western, textual hermeneutics to be understood and taught globally. Tom Steffen has helped guide my understanding that more than Western, textual hermeneutics is needed globally, and has inspired my investigation into the uncharted waters of oral hermeneutics.

**2. Definitions and initial exploration into relevant issues.**

The bulk of this introductory paper will be focused in this section as we try to gain some degree of clarity on what issues are pertinent to an exploration into oral hermeneutics, and how key concepts relate and are best understood.

**A. Hermeneutics**.

F.F. Bruce, in the New Bible Dictionary (1982), writes that hermeneutics is from the Gk. *hermēneuō* (‘interpret’), and is used to denote one of two possible meanings. It is the study and definition of central principles through which the biblical text can be understood, or it is the understanding of the biblical text so that its original message is clearly perceived by present readers or hearers. Grenz (1999) adds to this that hermeneutics also relates to “understanding the unique roles and relationships between the author, the text and the original or subsequent readers.” (p.59) I appreciate this addition because it draws out that there is a relationship between the ancient recipients and the modern readers, although I prefer the term “audience” to readers, since original or subsequent recipients were oftentimes not reading the text but were hearing it, which Bruce notes.

Davis (1981) states that within the sphere of biblical hermeneutics, “the primary concern is to recover the meaning which the text had for its original recipients.” (p.27) Davis also mentions that there is a broader sense of the term which strives to create a bridge between the biblical text and contemporary contexts in areas of chronology and culture by tying the ancient text to thought patterns and categories of the modern world. There is also a post-Bultmannian strain of “new hermeneutics” that attempts to bring the historical meaning of the text into contemporary situations while bypassing historical-critical methods, yet this more recent development is not dealt with in this paper. Grant Osborne (1991), in his seminal work, “The Hermeneutical Spiral,” adds that “…both text and its background are essential components of meaning.” (p.164-165.)

Packer (1981) addresses the issue of interpretation, or understanding of Scripture by modern audiences by drawing out the importance of discovery of the relevance of Scripture for us today in the hermeneutical process. He also emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of interpretation when he writes, “It is his (the Holy Spirit’s) special ministry through sermons, scholarship and personal prayerful study to make us aware of our needs and what God through the text is saying to us about them.” (1981, 38) Packer makes the point that to interpret Scripture well, two things are necessary: first, we must understand the jobs words do for us. They do not merely inform or command, but based upon that foundational premise, they shape all aspects of life. Second, we must understand the way God speaks to us. Packer says God uses sudden flashes of insight as well as through long, slow periods of study to grant us perception of how biblical truth applies to us. Rather than seeking any revelation apart from Scripture, we must turn to Scripture as God’s revelation of all we need for life and godliness.

But what flavor of hermeneutics is to be preferred and utilized? What is the Holy Spirit’s hermeneutic? George Wright (1952) definitively states, “as the Bible contains no system of theology, it likewise contains no self-conscious hermeneutical methodology.” (p.64). Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to explore all the hermeneutical methods at our disposal and glean the best principles from each in our attempts to study, understand and handle God’s Word well (2 Tim. 2:15).

**B. Textual hermeneutics.**

It should be noted that all the aforementioned treatments of hermeneutics primarily deal with the biblical text and textually-based methods of understanding, and are written by Western scholars. Therefore, we can add an important clarification to the term hermeneutics by defining textual hermeneutics as opposed to other hermeneutical methods. Textual hermeneutics utilizes Western-oriented, literary-based principles for understanding the Scriptures. These principles were based in Enlightenment thinking, which tended to be linear, scientific, left-brained and analytical. Dr. Steffen, in his class on narrative in Scripture and service makes the point that we have been trained from Enlightenment on that there is one answer to each question, and that everything funnels down to this. This is our hermeneutic. One meaning for the parable. One meaning for the text. But he asks, “Did the original writer have more than one meaning in mind, thus why he used a picture or symbol? Perhaps there can be elasticity in the midst of definite truth.” This sort of stretching discussion can be disturbing to some, yet we can use other passages in Scripture can help to keep the meaning within bounds.

Bernard Ramm (1954) is a good representative of the Western, scientifically-oriented, analytical, textual, linear hermeneutic taught in most schools today. His presuppositions include:

#1: Training in logic and science forms an excellent background for exegesis. Systematic theology and science go hand in hand, naturally flowing from his version of hermeneutics.

#2: Systematic teaching of Scripture is the Scriptures final intention, therefore biblical teachers should teach systematically (pp.153-155). Yet the question must be asked, “Is a scientifically-oriented mind better equipped to understand God’s Word than an artistic mind, especially in view of the fact of the many stories, symbols and pictures used in the Bible? Does God have a preference or is He able to use multiple styles to communicate His truth?”

Walt Kaiser guides us in some fundamental hermeneutical principles with the following list of priorities for interpretive patterns, which would all be textually, rather than orally, rooted:

1. the critical placement of interpretive statements in the textual sequence;

2. the frequency of repetition of the ideas;

3. the recurrence of phrases or terms that begin to take on a technical status;

4. the resumption of themes where a forerunner had stopped often with a more extensive area of reference;

5. the use of categories of assertions previously used that easily lend themselves to a description of a new stage in the program of history;

6. the organizing standard by which people, places, and ideas were marked for approval, contrast, inclusion, and future and present significance. (1978, pp.11-12)

Most writers on the subject of hermeneutics, including many in the resource section at the end of this paper, employ textual hermeneutics methods as the primary way through which we can understand and handle Scripture. In fact, the Pathways Bible training I conduct in Africa for pastors is primarily built upon these literary methods of understanding the text of Scripture. Observing the words of the text, focusing on the literary and historical context of those words, dealing with the structure and flow of thought of that section of Scripture, and studying the literary genres, the poetic tools and linking words are all textually driven hermeneutical methods which oral learners may find difficult to process and utilize. The one element we teach that moves beyond textuality into the larger metanarrative of all of Scripture is the Bible’s Salvation Story, a tool that helps us understand the meaning of a passage in the larger context of Scripture’s overarching theme or message. Oral learners, who readily grasp the whole before the parts, appreciate this part of our training which communicates the whole story of the Bible.

It should be stated clearly that God chose to give us His Word in written form, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and so textual methods of understanding are vitally important in the hermeneutical process. Yet the question must be asked, “Is this the only way God communicated His Word? Did He at times originally communicate it orally, with the intention that oral methods of understanding be used in addition to textual methods? Is there a difference between understanding oral communication and written communication? These are some of the questions which must be addressed, which move beyond an exclusive textual hermeneutic.

**C. Oral hermeneutics.**

This is a much more difficult term to define, and in my research I have come across few concise, insightful, helpful definitions of it. This is particularly interesting since the majority of the world, some say up to 70% (and increasing) are orally-oriented. Dr. Steffen in a class on Narrative in Scripture shared that 60-70% or more of the world's population prefer the concrete/narrative mode of learning to abstract/propositional (ideas) thinking.

In a helpful email from Dr. Tim Brannagan, leader of ReachGlobal’s orality training movement, he wrote:

“There is very little written on the topic (of oral hermeneutics). Many orality methodologies do not take into account hermeneutics. A few deal with observation but immediately jump to application. Very few deal adequately with interpretation or the meaning of the text. Story-centric teaching and learning is more than just reciting a Bible story. The appropriate use of dialogue “discovery” questions is vital. Oral learners who “discover” the truth, own the truth. Those who “own” the truth, can apply the truth. The question is, “what ‘truth’ are they discovering, owning, and applying?” I am striving to lead oral learners to appropriately discern the meaning of the text so that appropriate application can be made.”

There is a high degree of debate over the subject of singular vs. multiple intended meanings of the original text. Perhaps there is more than just one way of understanding God’s communicated Word, just as when someone orally speaks the message, “Please, eat the vegetables,” depending on their tone and nonverbal gestures, this message may carry an exasperated meaning of a parent, or a gracious meaning of a host. Although textual hermeneutics may suggest there is only one way to understand any text, oral practitioners would likely be more comfortable with a variety of understandings, held within bounds through other sections of Scripture. However, the question of if the writer/communicator had only one intended meaning for his original audience is difficult to answer from our point of view a few millennia after the fact.

Walter Ong, a leading scholar in the field of orality, states in his preface to Werner Kelber’s “The Oral and the Written Gospel,” (1983) that landing on exactly what oral hermeneutics is and how it is different from textual hermeneutics is quite challenging.

“Because of lack of understanding of oral psychodynamics, neither form criticism nor redaction criticism nor other biblical scholarship has succeeded in producing a truly oral hermeneutic. Indeed, one might say that biblical scholarship generally has not even tried to produce such a hermeneutic, differentiated from a textual hermeneutic, for one has to be acquainted with the mass of extrabiblical scholarship just mentioned to become aware that such a differentiated hermeneutic is even called for or possible.” (Ong, p. xiv).

Kelber’s central premise is that “the oral medium, in which words are managed from mouth to ear, handles information differently from the written medium, which links the eye to visible but silent letters on the page.” (p. xv) Kelber believes that study of the Bible has become disproportionately print-oriented in its hermeneutic. Walter Ong calls this the “chirographic bias” of Western intellectuals. Several have noted that since the “Gutenberg galaxy” arrived on the scene, biblical scholarship is lopsided toward textuality. “We treat words primarily as records in need of interpretation, neglecting all too often a rather different hermeneutic, deeply rooted in biblical language that proclaims words as an act inviting participation.” (p. xvi)

One of the few who has taken on the daunting task of defining oral hermeneutics is Dr. Tom Steffen. He offers some clarity on the oral nature of theology and dialogue in the biblical text while still maintaining the ambiguity of the orality movement when he writes in an unpublished article entitled “Saving Locals from Our Theologies,” (EMS NW, 2017):

“Oral hermeneutics focuses on the conversations between characters (humans, spirits, animals). As it searches for mysterious meaning it centers in on character theology rather than conceptual theology; it focuses on the dialogical, ongoing conversations within the text, and the inner discussion going on between the listener and the author (and Author) of the text. Frozen text melts away to living dialogue.”

As Steffen mentioned, there is a close link between oral hermeneutics and relatively new branches of theology, such as narrative theology and character theology. Discussing these theologies is beyond the scope of this paper, yet it is important to be aware that theology is much broader than just the systematic or biblical theology taught in Western seminaries.

It is helpful to note, as we try to wrap our minds around the concept of oral hermeneutics, that this movement is not new, and is not the enemy of traditional textual hermeneuticists. Rather, oral hermeneutics works to preserve the true meaning of the original story, which is what all biblical scholars are after. How was the story originally understood? In order to deal with this, we also need to touch on definitions of narrative and metanarrative, which will come soon. As Steffen has rightly said, oral hermeneutics reminds us of the need to focus on characters rather than just concepts, to move beyond propositional statements, which are preferred in the West, to the meaning of the story.

Caution should be given in dealing with the biblical text, to beware being too rooted in the formatting of our Western Bibles, including chapters/verses/headings/cross-references, etc. These are not how the Bible was originally communicated, not intended to be read/divided, but rather was a much later addition, according to Paauw (2016). This has created a “snacking” instead of “feasting” culture in biblical study.

At the same time, the necessity for oral hermeneutics, even as an aid for textual hermeneutics, is become more widely accepted. “A sophisticated oral hermeneutic opens the way to deeper understanding not merely of orality but of texts themselves.” (Ong in Kelber, 1983, p. xiv) In this way, the central thesis of this paper comes into clear view: we in global training spheres must move beyond Western, textual hermeneutical methods to include oral elements in training pastors how to understand God’s Word. It is my belief that there must be a balance between textual and oral hermeneutics to have a full, holistic, contextually-relevant understanding of Scripture. There is a reciprocal relationship between orality and textuality – they need each other and benefit from each other.

As is becoming obvious, there are a variety of issues and questions with which we must wrestle: What is oral hermeneutics as compared with textual hermeneutics? How does oral hermeneutics differ from textual hermeneutics, and how are they similar? Can they work together, or are they mutually exclusive? And how will modern day global audiences, many of whom are oral learners similar to the original recipients of God’s message, best understand God’s Word?

**D. Orality.**

Orality is an enormous and quickly growing field of study which will not be dealt with in any depth in this paper. However, for our purposes, I will share the definition for orality Dr. Steffen gave in our narrative class: “Orality (including oral, aural, visual, digital, social) denotes pedagogical preferences designed to process, remember, and communicate verbally and pictorially through social connections, rather than through literate forms.” In other words, we are dealing with how people prefer to learn and share what they learn. There are two classifications of oral learners:

* *Primary* – illiterate people who cannot read or write.
* *Secondary* – literate people who prefer oral and visual means to learn, imagine and communicate.

(cf. Steffen, T. “Story in Life, Ministry, and Academics.” Faculty Luncheon, Biola University. April 9, 2014. P.13. Also cf. Ong, W. 1991.“Orality and Literacy.”)

I will spend more time on orality issues related to hermeneutics a bit later in this paper.

**E. Narrative (metanarrative / Grand Narrative) vs. propositions.**

Narrative may be understood as “the account by a narrator of events and participants moving in some pattern over time and space.” (Steffen, 1996, p.222) Narrative is story. While most of the world prefers narrative as a means of learning truth, in the West we traditionally focus on propositional truth. So how do these two interrelate? Again, as is consistent with our theme, both are necessary and complement each other. Propositions require narrative for context, and narrative requires propositions for focus. Propositional logic looks at facts. Narrative logic includes emotions, mystery and imagination, and is more open to ambiguity. The latter is more why we make decisions we make, while still incorporating propositional logic.

In contrast to contemporary orality trends, homiletical guru John Broadus (1979, updated edition from 1870) stated that narrative is in a class of its own and has different hermeneutical rules that apply. “A speaker must always subordinate narration to the object of his discourse, the conviction or persuasion which he wishes to effect. He must not elaborate or enlarge upon some narrative merely because it is in itself interesting, or follow the story step by step according to its own laws.”

Within our context of biblical hermeneutics, metanarrative or “Grand Narrative” is the overarching story of Scripture, providing a framework, with unified themes into which all the parts, characters and stories of the Bible contribute and have a role. To properly understand any portion of the Bible, one must consider how it fits into the overarching story/message of the Bible. Otherwise, proof texting will result. In the biblical metanarrative, we don’t just start with Jesus. We start at the beginning to understand how Jesus fits in. Dr. Steffen has said that the meaning of the story is in the story, which is all part of oral hermeneutics. To understand any part, you must understand the whole. To understand epistles, must understand Acts and Old Testament books. If we focus on characters and not the God behind the characters, we will miss the theme of the Bible. The metanarrative keeps us from reading our culture into the story, for we give priority to God’s overarching story and see how individual stories progressively inform and reveal His Story. Relevant questions within narrative studies are: Who is the hero of the story? How does this story build on what has come before and anticipate what is to come later? Fee and Stuart (1993) address the continuity of the biblical narrative in the following quote:

“Every individual OT narrative (bottom level) is at least a part of the greater narrative of Israel's history in the world (the middle level), which in turn is a part of the ultimate narrative of God's creation and his redemption of it (the top level). This ultimate narrative goes beyond the OT through the NT. You will not fully do justice to any individual narrative without recognizing its part within the other two.” (p. 80)

Ken Bailey (1976) reminds us of the need for alternative hermeneutical approaches beyond rigid textual strategies when he writes, "Any attempt to state in propositional terms a tightly constructed interlocking system of interpretive principles...is doomed to failure. The parables are artistically told stories that break the boundaries of all rationalistic systems." (p.38).

**F. Narrative hermeneutics.**

Having dealt briefly with narrative and metanarrative, we can now touch on a definition and understanding of narrative hermeneutics. Again, we seek what the author intended the original audience to understand through the story, and then add to this understanding the flow of all of Scripture as God’s message is progressively communicated. William Stegner wrote, “The interpreter (or storyteller) must learn to work through the story and state the meaning in terms of the story. This is no easy task because it means entering into the world of the story.” (quoted by Steffen, 1996, p.45.) This will be essential to communicate the original meaning of the story as the author intended. As we learned in the narrative section above, story provides the framework for how God’s message is communicated. In this way, the Bible not only communicates what to teach but also how to teach. We are to move chronologically, through God’s Story as a hermeneutical framework, with oral and textual hermeneutics working in harmony.

Fee and Stuart (1993) share several helpful principles for understanding narrative genre in the following list:

1. An OT narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.

2. An OT narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.

3. Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story.

4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us.

5. Most of the characters in OT narratives are far from perfect and their actions are, too.

6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. Genius of story and Sacred Story.

7. All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all relevant details supplied (Jn 21:25). Can you be told without being told?

8. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions.

9. Narratives may teach either explicitly or implicitly.

10. God is the hero of all biblical narratives (my emphasis). (pp.83-84)

They then make the statement, "You want to read things out of the narrative, rather than into it," (p.87), which I take to mean that the author’s intended meaning in the narrative drives the understanding of the text rather than allowing our pre-understanding to influence the meaning of the story.

Closely linked with narrative hermeneutics is oral criticism. Most biblical scholars are familiar with textual methods of grammatical historical criticism and grammatical literary criticism. But another branch of biblical criticism is oral criticism as we realize there isn’t just one form or style for how to analyze Scripture. The Bible is literary document, but it is also an oral document.

Another factor which we must consider is the context of modern recipients of God’s message. How do Africans, for example, tell stories and understand stories? Their narrative hermeneutics must be studied, understood and then the biblical message must be contextualized to match this for their understanding to be in line with the author’s intent.

One of the challenges found in narrative hermeneutics is that while the stories tell a message in and of themselves, the author’s intent is oftentimes eclipsed by other issues. What was God’s purpose in telling the story? Why did He put it here? What was the writer’s or redactor’s purpose? When looking at narrative, how do we determine author’s intent? Who were the original readers/hearers/audience? What was the historical context of the story? How do we incorporate authorial intent into biblical storytelling?

Susan Shaw (1999) writes about the relationship of characters and the meaning of the story as she shares thoughts also from Flannery O’Connor in the following quote:

“Flannery O’Connor suggests that characters are shown through action, and action is controlled through characters. This results in meaning that drives from the whole presented experience. Thus, characters and action interact within a story to create meaning, which is the story itself. In other words, character, action, and meaning are inseparably bound up together in a story.

“This means a story cannot be reduced to one thematic statement about its meaning. On the contrary, the story itself is the meaning. O’Connor insists that a story says something which cannot be said any other way. Every word in the story is necessary to say what the meaning is. One tells a story because a statement would be inadequate.” (p.55).

Clearly, there is a close relationship between narrative and oral hermeneutics. Perhaps the field of narrative hermeneutics is an entire arena yet uncharted, along with oral hermeneutics, that still needs to be explored. Does narrative hermeneutics go beyond a certain genre of biblical literature to address how people (then and now) think, learn and perceive truth? These are important issues yet to be explored.

**G. Neopentecostal hermeneutics.**

I will only ever so briefly touch on this recently exploding sub-field of hermeneutics, not because we will deal with it in this paper, but because it is a method of understanding the Bible that is quickly growing all over the globe. Neopentecostal hermeneutics has to do with the understanding and application of the biblical text within the framework of the health and wealth prosperity movement. Dr. Starcher from BIOLA sees this method of understanding biblical texts as focusing on “immediate interpretation and application of text without any theologizing.” (private conversation, July 2017). Scriptural texts are interpreted related to their ability to provide blessings from God promised in the Bible, but applicable for us today, right here and right now. For example, in Nigeria there is a Pentecostal movement that is reinterpreting the Lord’s Supper using the lens of prosperity theology. Again, this field will not be explored in this paper.

**H. Cultural hermeneutics.**

The final branch of hermeneutics upon which we will touch is cultural hermeneutics. I see two parts of cultural biblical hermeneutics. First, there is the need to understand biblical culture, and second, there is the need to understand the modern culture to which we bring the Bible. Both require care in understanding, looking beyond our personal cultural lenses. Cultural hermeneutics examines all aspects of how people in a society perceive, understand and learn new truths related to life and reality. Linked with cultural hermeneutics will be familiar questions such as,

* How was the Bible originally intended to be communicated?
* What hermeneutic did the author intend the original audience to use?
* How will the pastors we train best learn and understand the author’s intent?
* To what extent, if any, does culture determine hermeneutical methods?
* Which takes priority (ancient or contemporary culture), or can they work together?

Any society has a way of keeping their culture intact, and some define this as their cultural hermeneutic. Various cultures differ in how they do this, for example they may be collectivistic or individualistic, they may be high-context or low-context, abstract or concrete, their view on reciprocity or power-distance may vary, and they may differ in their preferred value sets (H/S, G/I, P/F, P/P). They may prefer a character study vs. content study of Scripture. They may understand better in terms of parts to whole, or whole to parts. All of these cultural factors can affect how members in a society understand Scripture and what their preferred hermeneutic is.

Becoming more sensitive to cultural factors will open new portals of insight into the culture in which the texts of Scripture were originally written, likely increasing the breadth and depth of our perspective on biblical truths. Therefore, we must become students of our target culture before we can effectively teach them. In the Pathways Bible training I do in Africa, I teach the importance of observing the text carefully, understanding the author’s intent, recognizing there was a context in which he was writing, so we must exegete our target culture.

Dr. Steffen has suggested that for teaching hermeneutics in culturally appropriate ways, the goal is first to figure out how the target audience tells stories. Then you must match your hermeneutic to this and contextualize your message and the Bible’s message to how they tell stories. As we touched on in the previous treatment of narrative, stories are a key portal through which we can learn how people in any culture learn and understand truth, including the Bible.

Close akin to cultural hermeneutics is the field of ethno-hermeneutics. In conversations with Dr. Enoch Wan from Western Seminary about this subject, he shared that there is nothing absolute outside of God, and that all humans are inevitably culturally linked in various ways. He said that ethno-hermeneutics is an absolute necessity, because we are all coming to Scripture with our cultural frame of reference. The other challenge is that the Holy Spirit inspired Bible writers within a certain context, but we are in a different context, which yields a big gap. In ethno-hermeneutics, we try to narrow the gap, but we can’t do it completely. We have a certain frame of reference that shapes our views in various areas. The goal in ethno-hermeneutics, as with cultural hermeneutics, is to be aware of our frame of reference and how it affects our view of Scripture and those to whom we take Scripture.

The warning must be heeded not to force our own cultural presuppositions into the Bible or on our target culture. Care must be taken not to read into the Bible what my culture believes to be right or wrong. For example, in the West many view democracy as the best form of government, but we must not think that the Bible teaches democracy is best, for that is not clearly stated. In fact, according to the biblical record, a stronger case can be made for a theocracy, which occurred before the monarchy was established in Israel. This is one reason we in Pathways don’t teach the Bible per say, but how to study the Bible. Yet even here we need to be careful not to let our Western culture and training dictate how we teach other cultures to read, study and teach the Bible.

In an effort to narrow our focus a bit, I’ll turn our attention to the African continent. The enormous, 828-page tome by West and Dube, “The Bible in Africa” (2000), worked to bring African and biblical scholarship together. In Gerrie Snyman’s helpful review of this book, she shares that there were many goals African readers had for handling the biblical texts. In some cases, their hermeneutic was to build “a post-colonial identity.” (2003, 408) At other times, biblical texts were used to address particular African customs. These pragmatic, consumeristic approaches to the text seem quite Western. In still other cases, the Bible is used to “establish or reinforce African pride.” Snyman, who works at the University of South Africa in the Dept. of Old Testament, cautions that essays in “The Bible in Africa” were overly focused on a-historical readings of the Bible, taken out of their biblical context and manipulated to support one’s own ideology. When this happens, the authority of the Bible is undermined, and it becomes susceptible to the whims of any practitioner.

Cultural factors will continue to play a significant role in our understanding of oral hermeneutics, for in the end, any person trying to understand the Bible will be interpreting it through their cultural lenses. A helpful resource I have frequently recommended for Western readers along these lines is Richards, E. R., & O'Brien, B. J. (2012). *Misreading Scripture with Western eyes: Removing cultural blinders to better understand the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books.

**I. Homiletics.**

Perhaps it will be helpful to make a brief statement about the difference between hermeneutics and homiletics. Homiletics is the theological discipline that focuses on the preparation and delivery of sermons (Grenz, 1999). While homiletics is certainly more focused on the audience today, yet there is a part of the field of study which considers faithfulness to the intended meaning of Scripture, presenting messages which are culturally relevant. There can be no doubt that any hermeneutical method will inevitably bleed into a particular style of homiletics. For example, the training I do in Africa, which is at present largely Western, textual, exegetical hermeneutics, naturally lends itself to an expository style of preaching, which leads us to our next set of terms.

**J. Exegesis and exposition.**

Exegesis, as contrasted with eisegesis, literally means to “draw the meaning out of” or to let the text communicate its meaning on its own terms rather than reading meaning into the text (eisegesis). To read a personal, familial or cultural meaning into a text is what we call “pre-understanding,” which is incredibly common and easy to fall into. We all have our presuppositions about various realities, and it feels very natural to understand a passage of Scripture in light of what we already believe to be true. Rather, exegesis is the discipline of setting our preunderstandings aside for the time being, and letting Scripture speak truth to us and then shaping our perceptions around what Scripture has revealed. Exegesis is closely related to hermeneutics because both deal with how we understand the Bible’s message. Exegesis works to set present cultural factors aside while dealing with the textual and contextual issues in the biblical record.

This leads to the homiletical method of exposition, which is the communication of the text following the structure, flow of thought and intention of the author to the original audience. Expository preaching is one common style that is produced from textual hermeneutics. A popular expository preacher, Dr. John MacArthur, wrote that expository preaching “explains the text, persuades the mind, obligates the will, feeds the soul, excites the emotion, and touches the life.” (1992, p.289) In contrast to imposing one’s ideas on the text, the goal is to expose the meaning of the text and apply it to the lives of the hearers. In contrast to topical preaching, which combines a series of verses loosely connected to a theme, or textual preaching, which uses a short passage as a “gateway” for the preacher to address a subject, expository preaching hones in on one section of Scripture, working to understand, “expose,” and apply the central meaning of that text to the lives of the audience. Richard Mayhue summarized key elements of expository preaching as flowing from careful exegesis of Scripture, interpreting Scripture correctly within its context, explaining the original, God-intended meaning of the passage, applying appropriately the meaning for today (MacArthur, 1992, p.13). Some passages that illustrate expository preaching would include Nehemiah 8:8, Acts 20:26-27, Luke 4:16-22 (Jesus expounding on Isaiah 61:1-2), and Acts 8:27-35 (Philip expounding on Isaiah 53:7-8).

**K. Contextualization.**

Contextualization is a key issue in our exploration into hermeneutics, for it seeks to bridge the gap between ancient teachings and text with contemporary groups using modern language, metaphors and images that are familiar to modern audiences. The debate is over how far a practitioner can go in changing the language of the text without losing the essence of the message originally intended (Grenz, 1999). Contextualization also touches upon the application of the text in the lives of modern people, especially how principles apply in a non-Christian culture. Thus, communication is a key element in the contextualization process with which we must wrestle. What is the role of understanding the original text vs. communicating it in contextually appropriate ways? There seems to be a divide between those who emphasize understanding the original meaning and those who emphasize relevance in communication as paramount. Is your attention more focused on the text or on your audience? Can it be appropriately divided between the two?

The debate between various camps regarding the appropriateness of contextualization can be seen in the different views indicated between the two following quotes:

“The apostles went out with an absolute disdain for contextualization. The modern drive for cultural contextualization is a curse, because people are wasting their time trying to figure out clever ways to draw in the elect. Contextualization is ‘zip-code ministry.’ The message of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is transcendent. It goes beyond its immediate culture or sub-culture. It crosses the world, and ignores the nuances of culture. It never descends to clothing or musical style, as if that had anything to do with the message of the Gospel…. Does your message ignore the trends and superficial icons of culture, and bring heaven down in its transcendent reality? Can you take your sermons and preach them anywhere?” (MacArthur, J. *Pulpit Magazine.* March 5, 2008. No longer in print.)

Compare that strong view with the following quote:

“Those who are best informed should not be insisting that theirs is the only way to think responsibly about the relations between Christ and (the broader) culture. Rather, they should be striving simultaneously to grapple with all the turning points in redemptive history, even while they recognize that their own cultural location demands that certain biblical emphases must have a higher priority than others.” (Carson, D.A. *Christ and culture revisited.* 2008. p.85.)

An example of this is found in Gospel presentations to Chinese people. In Chinese, there is no concept of sin (i.e. missing the mark). Evangelists misrepresent the Gospel because they try to substitute “wrong” for “sin” which has a different connotation. Also, any talking about death with a Chinese person will instantly stop the conversation. The number four has bad connotations, and so the evangelistic booklet “Four Spiritual Laws” is contextually inappropriate. All of these contextual factors must be taken into account if someone wants to accurately communicate the meaning of biblical passages and themes in culturally relevant ways.

Other examples of the importance of contextualization might include differences in how a text is understood and then preached. In one culture it might require a very different tactic than in another culture. Returning to the example of sin: How a collectivistic culture understands sin (affecting whole body) is different than how an individualistic culture understands sin (my sin is mine and doesn’t affect you.) In Matthew 5 when Jesus said, “You are the light of the world,” we individualistically-oriented people think “I am the light,” (singular) but Jesus said “you” (plural) are light. We are quickly forced to grapple with the fundamental question: Are there different understandings of a biblical text in different cultures, or is there one understanding but many different applications culturally?

At this point, perhaps it is appropriate to admit a tension I feel between Western, textually-driven hermeneutical methods of Bible study and the more culturally-oriented hermeneutical methods proposed by orality movements and schools like Cook School for Intercultural Studies at BIOLA. I see positive contributions from both camps, and there is a struggle to bring the two competing viewpoints together. One of my goals in this adventure upon which I am embarking is to reconcile the differences as much as possible, or at least to find a blending between the two where the key benefits and integrity from each side can be maintained. As Glenn Paauw reminds us, “The Bible was written for us, but not directly to us.” (2016, p.69.) The task before us is how to bring an ancient Book relevantly to modern people, many of whom are oral learners, while still preserving the integrity and intent of the writer who communicated to ancient people, oftentimes orally. May God help us in this daunting hermeneutical assignment.

**3. A brief treatment of Scriptural transmission and orality.**

Although this may seem like a tangent, I believe these issues are relevant to our discussion of oral hermeneutics, for the means through which the Bible was transmitted and received plays a key role in how it was and will be understood, whether by the original audience or recipients today. Obviously, large books have been written on these subjects, so my goal is not to rehash what is in those books, but rather to briefly consider how some of these topics affect our understanding of oral hermeneutics.

A number of questions quickly emerge in our minds related to these subjects. Regarding the issue of the transmission of the Bible, how was the Scripture originally communicated and passed on? Was the spoken Word inspired, or was it only the written Word? Which was inerrant and possessing divine authority? How can oral and textual transmission of God’s Word work together?

Based on studies of the ancient Mediterranean culture in which Scripture was originally communicated, as well as the self-attestation of numerous biblical verses, it is clear that the majority of the recipients of Scripture heard rather than read the message from God. Perhaps the select few read what was written by some scribe, but this was not the primary medium for how Scripture would have been communicated to the masses.

Sections and whole books of Bible were intended to be read orally, publicly, in groups, to the masses for their edification. There was a scribe writing as Paul was speaking, then what was written was read in various locations. As the text is being read, oral hermeneutics helps with proper understanding. Thus, we can speak of the “oral text,” written material intended to be read aloud, listened to by an oral audience. For example, the lyrics of a song are intended to be sung.

Some of the many examples of this in Scripture worth noting are:

* Rev. 1:3 - Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.
* Rev. 2:7ff – Seven times we read, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”
* 1 John 1:1,3 – “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—… that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us….”
* Neh. 8:8-9 – “They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly (lit. with interpretation), and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.”
* 1 Tim. 4:13 – “Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.”
* Deut. 31:11-13 – “When all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place that he will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.”
* Joshua 8:34-35 – “And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the Book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.”
* Col. 4:16 – “And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.”
* 1 Thess. 5:27 – “I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.”
* 2 Thess. 2:15 – “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.”
* Acts 8:30 – “So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’” (Reading was typically done out loud.)
* Rom. 10:17 – “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”
* 2 Tim. 2:2 – “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”

It would be an interesting study to try to determine how much of the Bible was originally written down to be read vs. spoken to be heard. My belief is that even those parts that were written were most times written for the ear to hear rather than for the eye to see. Most of the Bible was originally to be communicated orally, written for the oral ear. It was written in a way that oral people could understand. It was textual, but able to be understood orally. Yet it needed to be written down so the stories would not change over time and the truth be lost. Thus again, our thesis of how textuality and orality work in synergistic partnership.

Perhaps a few quotes will be helpful at this point:

Birger Gerhardsson states, “In antiquity, words were written down in order to be read out. Even the written word was formulated for the ear.” (“The Gospel Tradition,” in *The interrelationships of the Gospels,* edited by David L Dungan, 1990. Leuven: University Press. 495-545. p. 519)

Leland Ryken (1992) states that the New Testament in addition to the Old Testament is strongly oral.

“Most of what we read almost certainly existed first in oral form. Oral forms such as addresses, sayings, and dialogues dominate the narrative parts of the New Testament (the Gospels and Acts), whose individual units probably circulated orally before being collected in written documents. The Epistles, for the most part, were intended for public reading. The same is true of the Book of Revelation.” (p.367)

Ryken also quotes Wilder who summarizes, “Oral speech is where it all began…. Even when [the writers] did come to write we can overhear the living voices, speaking and praising. The kind of writing is very close to speech.” (1992, p.367) He later refers to the words in the Gospels when he writes, “Jesus…did not write his words as we find them in the Gospels. He spoke them…. To read the New Testament is to become a listener of the spoken word.” (1992, p.459)

“The New Testament is also strongly oral.

Tom Steffen, in his unpublished paper for EMS in 2017 entitled, “Saving Locals from Our Theologies,” helps to clarify original intent and orality by asserting,

“Words like, “hear,” “heard,” “said,” “say,” “speak,” “announce,” “proclaim,” “listen,” “teach,” “exhort,” “sing,” “ear” dominate the landscape of Old and New Testaments as authors intuitively chose oral categories to communicate the “Word of God” for listeners. Voiced writing resulted. … The “Word” was not thought of as certain unchangeable words (in contrast to meaning), “word studies,” “proof-texting,” or word dissections to their minutest fragment. Rather, it was considered as a living event in time and space expressed and sensed through emotive words, inflections, intensity, facial expressions, gestures, and so forth, that demanded dialogue to discover its mysterious meaning.”

Steffen goes on to share, “The epistolary authors use language which suggests a conversation is going on between them and the receivers of the letter.” Instead of asking the philosophical, Western, propositional question, “What shall we think/reason/suggest/propose about this?” Paul poses the oral, verbal, dialogical question, “What then shall we *say*?” (Rom. 8:31) Steffen resumes, “Such oral engagement continues as the “writers” use verbs of speaking rather than verbs or writing.” (ibid)

The International Orality Network (ION) simply states, “Scripture was written for the ear!” (*Making Disciples of Oral Learners*. Bangalore: ION/LCWE, 2005. P.11-12.)

Grant Osborne (1991) states that there was a failure of form and redaction criticism to interpret the text. Therefore, narrative hermeneutical principles which oral learners would use of considering the unity of the larger passage were necessary. “The tendency to break the text into isolated units is widely perceived as counterproductive, and so scholars turned to the much more literarily aware field of narrative criticism to breach the gap.” (p.153). Oral learners work best when understanding the whole, then moving to parts, rather than starting with parts and eventually getting the whole. Therefore, telling them the overarching metanarrative of the Bible and then working through individual parts is most effective. Redaction is the process of gathering together various accounts and editing them into one cohesive document. Written and storied accounts were gathered to give us our Bible. This was true in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Authors collected from various sources, both written and oral. The message was discussed, shared, and passed on before being written. Some other resources on this subject suggested by Dr. Steffen include:

Botha, J.J. & Rhoads D. (2013). *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity (Biblical*

*Performance Criticism Book 5).* Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

Walton, J. H. (2013). *The lost world of scripture: ancient literary culture and biblical authority.* Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press.

Another aspect of Scriptural transmission has to do with the progression of development through various critical methods of examination of the biblical text and world. For example, historical criticism helped biblical scholars explore the historical world and context of the author and original recipients, but in some ways the biblical text and literary elements were lost in the process of investigation. The grammatical-historical criticism tried to address this by adding the divine inspiration by God of the author, yet the interaction of the reader/hearer with the text is not factored into the examination. Literary criticism sees the Bible as a literary document which must be interpreted as such with various literary tools (cf. Ryker, etc.), and finally oral criticism adds the emotional aspect to the literature as the original audience is drawn into the story or text. All of these elements play a role in the hermeneutical process, and can be studied more in depth to sort out the best ways to understand authorial intent, which admittedly is often missing from the discussion of orality and oral hermeneutics.

So it appears in many cases that Scripture came from oral retelling of stories. Inspiration and inerrancy came after oral telling, so that the Holy Spirit guided the writing down (or dictating) of original autographs. Even if stories were orally retold for centuries (e.g. Genesis), the Spirit inspired writers (tellers) so that writing was inerrant and from God. However, in my study I noticed something interesting in one of the premier verses on inspiration. 2 Peter 1:21 says, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men *spoke* from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (ESV) Notice it does not say they *wrote*. Perhaps the spoken as well as written words are inspired by God.

Dr. Steffen has commented that there were at least five factors that worked together to compose what we have today in our Scriptures. They include the involved process of canon construction, which included written redaction and oral transmission, and the volume of material in the Bible, which is predominantly narrative. There is also the oral hermeneutic of how the original recipients would have understood the read or spoken Word, including character theology and internal dialogue, all of which is oftentimes neglected by big brother textuality in the West, but this was not true in biblical times. Then one must factor in the method of delivery and how the message was received, which was primarily heard through the ear rather than read through the eye.

Already, we can list a growing number of questions related to transmission and orality issues that are closely related with hermeneutics. Can fluid oral transmission be considered authoritative? Can it be inerrant? Can God inspire a spoken message so it is inerrant? Did He? Is meaning rather than wording God’s primary intent in revelation? Are both written redaction as well as oral transmission authoritative and linked in canon development? Have we emphasized the written words over the meaning? Is meaning (oral) rather than wording (literal) God’s primary intent in revelation? Is this a false dichotomy? Can both work together? (cf. Steffen, Narrative course notes.)

Here again we return to our primary thesis. We need both oral and literary/textual hermeneutical components to work in synergy to produce the inspired Word of God we have today. When thinking of modern day settings, in global contexts where orality is preferred, we must help locals understand literary, textual hermeneutics. In contexts where textual, literary hermeneutics are preferred, we must help them understand oral hermeneutics. Working together we have a more holistic (and accurate) hermeneutic.

**4. The relationship between hermeneutics and homiletics**

This subject has already been introduced above, but a few more points can be made that pertain to oral hermeneutics. As was mentioned, a particular hermeneutical style will in most cases lead to a corresponding homiletical style. For example, a textual, exegetical hermeneutic will oftentimes lead to a textually-based expository sermon. We must keep this in mind when considering the audience to which we are speaking.

In a helpful comparison chart between oral and literate cultures, Richard Jensen described some of the differences which must be considered in the realm of preaching:

***Preaching in an Oral Culture Preaching in A Literate Culture***

1. Stitching stories together 1. Linear development of ideas

2. Use of repetition 2. Structure ideas in space

3. Situational vs. abstraction 3. Propositions as the main point

4. A tone of conflict 4. Analytical in nature

5. Right brain communication 5. Left brain communication

6. Metaphors of participation 6. Metaphors of illustration

7. Thinking in story 7. Thinking in ideas (1993, p.43)

Caution must be used in how sermons are prepared by preachers who want to extract the “main point” or the propositional truth from the text, especially if it is a story. Well-known homiletician John Ortberg (1993) makes the following thought-provoking observation in Leadership Journal:

“Jesus taught in stories. This was not a concession to human weakness. To me there's something arrogant about a preacher who boils down the parables to their ‘basic principles’ as if the story is so much fluff that can be analyzed and safely discarded. Jesus was perfectly capable of laying out ‘Five Principles to Dynamic Praying.’ And the fact that he didn't should make us reflect.” (p.38).

In an intriguing illustration, Ken Bailey (1992) shares about the value of the story over simply the propositional truth which may be extracted from it.

“A person who buys an orange takes it home and squeezes the juice into a glass for breakfast. The methodology of squeezing the orange assists the person in putting the content of the orange into a form that is easily accessible to the purchaser. Well and good. But the full orange (before squeezing) is a greater reality than the small glass of juice, however appropriate the squeezing of the orange may be. Even so, biblical metaphors can be ‘squeezed’ and concepts extracted,” but the point is that there is a greater reality in the overarching story than just the propositional truth that is preached. (pp.18-19)

In another work, Jensen (1998) goes on to describe the shift that happened in homiletics when the literate world began to contribute to preaching:

“When preaching came under the tutelage of the literate world it changed immensely. Preaching began to be characterized by linearity (three points), propositional content, an analytical nature, left-brain communication, and metaphors of illustration. Christian proclamation moved from ‘thinking in story’ to ‘thinking in ideas.’ The goal of preaching moved from participation to understanding. Homiletical textbooks from the time of Gutenberg until very recently have taught us to preach by ‘thinking in ideas.’" (p.18).

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1872), in her inimitable way, declared nearly a century and a half ago in “My Wife and I”,

“It appears to me that the world is returning to its second childhood, and running mad for stories. Stories! Stories! Stories! …Soon it will be necessary that every leading clergyman shall embody his theology in a serial story, to be delivered from the pulpit Sunday after Sunday.”

We now know that stories are certainly not only for children, but that most audiences globally learn far more and better from narrative than they do from propositional truth.

The concern I have is that in following the well-worn paths of textual hermeneutical principles that most pastors are taught in seminary, and from those paths preaching sermons that are very comfortable for Western ears, we then take these methods to the majority world what has a different learning style, different thought pattern, different way of studying and understanding Scripture. If it is true that a hermeneutical style will flow into a corresponding homiletical style, we do a great disservice to the global church of God by setting up global pastors, most of whom are oral learners and preach to oral learners, for failure. They won’t appreciate and embrace Western methods, and their congregants will be utterly lost listening to textually-driven sermons.

Homiletics is an art as well as a science, and is very culturally driven. Therefore, to some extent hermeneutics should be aware of these issues also. A good sermon in a traditional Midwest American context will fall flat in a village church in northwest Tanzania or urban Tokyo. Exegetical methods flowing from hermeneutical underpinnings must create culturally-relevant sermons for contemporary audiences. The task of the preacher is to bring God’s message and God’s people together, the Word and the listeners. It is interesting that in most cases this is what the Bible did too. It brought God’s message, most times spoken orally, together with the original audience of listeners.

**5. Global and practical applications.**

As we turn our focus to the global church, what are the implications and applications of textual and oral hermeneutics on the grandly diverse cultural scale? Which is more effective globally – textual or oral hermeneutics? Or it is a continuum upon which each society and culture must determine where they fall? Perhaps elements of both can be gleaned and utilized.

I work with a wide range of pastors and preachers all over the continent of Africa: from Francophone West Africa to Swahili-speaking East Africa, from pastors in rural Zambia in the south to Sudanese pastors studying in Cairo, Egypt in the north. Some have received Westernized training from seminaries modeled on American schools. Others have no more than a third-grade education and are barely able to read or write. In this vast array of preachers, how am I to train them in the best way to study, understand and teach the Bible well in their churches? What hermeneutical methods strategies should I employ that will be most useful for them and reproducible when they pass the training on to other pastors? These are important questions as a missiological shift is underway moving from Westerners doing the church planting to global missionaries training locals how to reach and disciple their own people.

The first step is to determine the natural hermeneutic of the target people. What hermeneutical methods to Africans use, and which do they prefer, and why? Are they trying to reproduce something they saw a white person do, but which they don’t understand? In most cases, people in oral contexts will not be able to tell you their worldview and strategy for interpretation, because they live in it.

Instead, we must listen to how they tell stories, collect stories in their language and watch how they analyze those stories. How do they use questions? Do they look at content or character, and which cultural value sets are they utilizing? In order to determine their hermeneutical preferences, I must examine the way that African preachers develop their sermons. Before I teach them my Pathways Bible training techniques and tools, and taint them with a Western, textual style of hermeneutics for sermon prep, it will be important to give them a text and ask them what the process is for how they will preach it. Will they determine what it is saying, what it meant for the original readers and what it means for us today, and if so, how will they go about doing this. What will they preach about as they develop their message – will it be focused on the text, on the story, or on something entirely different? This will indicate their hermeneutic. If they will preach textual instead of topical, this will help me understand how they prepare sermons. This will be helpful research on African sermon preparation and even learning styles. How do “un-Westernized” Africans talk about hermeneutics, including the neo-Pentecostal group that gravitates toward the viral prosperity message of health/wealth preachers.

Once the natural hermeneutic of the target people is ascertained, it will be important to augment (not ignore) their hermeneutical patterns with other patterns that will yield a holistic approach to understanding the text. My goal is not to change their learning style, or move them from an oral hermeneutic to a textual hermeneutic. Rather, it is to broaden their range of understanding, to add tools in their toolbox so that they can use a variety of methods for interpreting any given text, and communicate the meaning of that text to their people.

To do this, my plan is to examine a test group and learn how they study, how they prepare messages, how they understand Scripture, how they tell stories, and many other elements that contribute to learning their hermeneutic. I began this process with a group of pastors in Nzaui region in southern Kenya for a class I took earlier in 2017 called Culture and Transformation. 20 pastors were asked a variety of questions to determine their patterns for learning and sermon preparation. The results for this qualitative research are shown in Appendix 1, and were illuminating in a variety of aspects. The goal again in all of this is not to change the culture of the pastors, but to enhance what they already do well, augmenting familiar patterns with other styles that will help the Word of God be preached more closely to what the author (and the Holy Spirit) originally intended.

Based upon what I learn in this process, I hope to modify the Pathways Bible training that I offer in Africa, and by extension the training my team does all over the world. Although my team is quite invested in what we are currently offering, and my team leader has clearly communicated that he does not believe there is any other viable hermeneutic to offer global pastors outside of literary, textual hermeneutics, I am hoping that with enough research and a strong enough argument, they can be persuaded to listen to other viewpoints.

A minor example of a modification I would like to make is that we in Pathways refer to God’s message being given not directly to us, but to “original readers.” Then, as we follow the Bible Pathway, it is eventually applied for us today. Along the way, there are a number of steps that we train global pastors to follow. As I have begun this research, I am suggesting we change the original group which received the message (orally or being read or written) to the “original audience” or “original recipients.” In all likelihood, most of those receiving the message were not reading it. Audience has the “audio” base of hearing the message. At times it may be confusing, for example in the Gospels when the audience of the sermon on the mount in Matt. 5-7 were those seated on the mount listening to Jesus preach, but the recipients were actually the those who received Matthew’s Gospel and read it or heard it read. Yet I believe it is a risk worth taking. The graphic we use to communicate the Bible Pathway is as follows:



Another example of a shift I would like to make in our training is that oral learners generally like to move from the whole to the parts, where they first understand the big picture, and then can study the parts and see how they all fit into that big picture. Oftentimes in the West we prefer to focus on the parts and later see how they fit together to make the whole. So in our Pathways material we start with some of the steps and tools, and only halfway through the three-year process do we teach the pastors the “Bible’s Salvation Story,” the overarching metanarrative of God’s plan from Genesis through Revelation. I would suggest instead that we offer at the beginning of our training and again at the end an opportunity for pastors to write the theme of the Bible in 2-3 sentences, and then discuss that together. We could have at least a lesson or two that focus on these issues, tracing biblical theology (the Red Thread) and key themes, characters, stories, rituals and symbols through the entire narrative, seeing how it all fits together. I believe this would be very helpful for our orality-oriented brothers and sisters.

An excellent resource I would like to make mandatory reading for all the U.S. pastors we take with us overseas to train national pastors is Richards and O’Brien’s “Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes.” (2012) All too often we impose our “western glasses” on the text of Scripture and misunderstand its meaning, since it was written as an ancient Mediterranean book in a different time and culture and worldview. What goes without saying, that all the original biblical readers would have understood, seems foreign to us today. Richards and O’Brien remind us what we all too quickly forget, that reading the Bible for us today is most certainly a cross-cultural experience.

Another important posture for western trainers to hold is to avoid biblical dogmatism. Plueddemann (2009) writes, “Where the Bible does not give clear principles, we must extend grace toward others. When the Bible is not clear about a leadership style, it is unbiblical to become dogmatic about that preference.” (p.109) Balance and keeping an open mind are key.

**6. Final thoughts:** Balance and synergy between textual and oral hermeneutics.

As was mentioned previously, it is my firm belief that the global kingdom of God will be significantly benefited through a balance of both textual and oral hermeneutics working synergistically together. Both oral and written elements were at work to produce the inspired Word of God we have today. Contemporary audiences around the world utilize oral and literary features in order to learn. Pastors must likewise tap into both these realms when they prepare for and then preach God’s message to God’s people. As I shared earlier, in global contexts where orality is preferred, we must help locals understand literary, textual hermeneutics. In contexts where textual, literary hermeneutics are preferred, we must help them understand oral hermeneutical methods. Working together we have a more holistic (and accurate) hermeneutic, a clearer portal for understanding and communicating God’s Word. Both hermeneutical methods are relevant and necessary. Text helps with understanding meaning, orality helps with communicating that meaning in the ears of the audience. Text helps to maintain integrity of message, orality gives the message emotion, imagination, feeling. Dr. Steffen shared in class this helpful comparison, with the goal of balance in each area between these two columns:

Head Heart

Word Deed

Propositional Experiential

Profane Sacred

Objective Subjective

Public Private

Meaning Mystery

Analytical Imaginative

Concrete Abstract

Explicit Intuitive

Facts Feelings

Left brain Right brain

Theory Practice

Teaching Learning

Micro Macro

Oral hermeneuticists and textual hermeneuticists have much to learn from each other, if we can drop our guard and have an open, teachable posture. This paper has already grown too long, but if we had more time, I’d like to share some more examples and applications from Scriptural texts of how oral and textual hermeneutical principles can function as counterparts, resulting in better understanding, but this can be saved for another paper. As we complement one another, I believe God will be honored and His Word will be better understood and handled by preachers all over the world, including in America.

As I previously mentioned, I am only just embarking on this journey into oral hermeneutics as compared with other hermeneutical patterns. I have worked tenaciously to compile a lengthy resource list which may be of use in the ongoing exploration of this important subject. I sincerely commend any who care to join me in this effort of launching movements of hermeneutically-trained global preachers and students of the Word who, like the men of Nehemiah’s day, gave a clear sense of the Word to those who were listening (Neh. 8:8-9).

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**Periodical issues devoted to the subject of orality and oral hermeneutics.**

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**Appendix 1 – Interviews** (Source citation is from a paper I wrote for Culture and Transformation class with Dr. Nehrbass, Spring, 2017.)

While in Kenya on my most recent trip, I conducted surveys and interviews with 20 AIC (Africa Inland Church) pastors from the Kamba tribe in the Nzaui region who will be participating in our Pathways training. The group was a bit unusual from those in Africa we often work with in that they were all from the same tribe, church affiliation and region. The average education level (formal Bible training) was much higher in this group than normal, with all but one responder having at least received a four-year Bible degree or diploma. When I asked interviewees how they determine what to preach to their people, three equally common answers were: pray to God for a message, look at the needs in my church, and choose a book/passage in the Bible to preach through. In terms of the process the pastors go through in preparing a sermon, nearly all of them mentioned some combination of prayer and reading/studying the Bible. Here are some of the other results:

1. How much time do you usually spend preparing a Sunday sermon? (Circle one)

0-5 hours 6-10 hours 11-15 hours 15+ hours.

5 8 3 4

What percentage of this is spent studying the text of the Bible? (Circle one)

0-10% 10-25% 25-50% 50-75% 75+%

0 1 5 12 2

1. What percentage of the people in your churches are able to read?

0-10% 10-25% 25-50% 50-75% 75+%

1 1 4 10 4

What percentage have Bibles?

0-10% 10-25% 25-50% 50-75% 75+%

4 6 8 2 0

What percentage use them when you are preaching?

0-10% 10-25% 25-50% 50-75% 75+%

3 10 5 2 0

1. How would you describe your preferred learning style (circle one letter):
   1. I prefer to watch others and repeat what I see them doing (in person, TV, video). =1
   2. I prefer to study written words (books, papers) and learn from what I read. =7
   3. I prefer to hear instructions or a message and learn by what I hear. =1
   4. I prefer to do my own thinking and test my decisions, learning by trial and error. =3
   5. I prefer to trust in the Lord and not use any of these methods. =8
   6. Some other method of learning. Please explain: =0

From these results, we can discern that this fairly academically-oriented group live out their values by spending the majority of their sermon prep time in the Bible. However, the majority of people in their churches neither have Bibles nor use them in a Sunday service, indicating they are not literary learners. It appears that the pastors’ learning styles are split between literary learning and using some unknown “spiritual” method of learning. However, I wonder if this question may not yield accurate results due to the fact that the participants would need to know the definitions of various learning styles listed in the interview and would need to have the self-awareness to know which style they prefer.

In order to learn which preachers are influencing interviewees (i.e. change agents, etc.) and thus what study patterns the interviewees may be following in their sermon preparation and delivery, I asked a series of questions related to these issues to determine a model learning method. In answer to the question who their favorite preacher is, the top answer was Rev. Timothy Mwangangi, a local preacher in the AIC DCC. Only two noted someone who is not African, but is widely known. When asked why they like him, the answers varied, but common themes were that their communication is clear, biblical (largest percentage), creative, easy to understand and applicable. When asked how you would describe your preferred preacher’s style of preaching, 18 out of the 20 interviewees responded that “he preaches through a Bible series using passage after passage of Scripture following the structure and intent of the author.” (expository preaching) When asked how the pastors think he prepares his sermons, most replied with answers relating to careful Bible study and exegesis of the text, with a few mentioning prayer or other elements. From these results, we can perceive that biblical exegesis and exposition are high values for this group, thus literary learning is valued.

Participants’ motivations for going through the Pathways training were almost uniformly because they eagerly desire to grow in their understanding of Scripture and preaching God’s Word well, with the runner-up answer being that they will receive a certificate upon completion, which is highly valued in Africa.

When I asked interviewees about the relative advantages of going through the Pathways program, specifically how studying the biblical text gives advantage over not studying (or being able to study) the biblical text, the responses were illuminating. Responders shared that the preaching of one who studies God’s Word is much richer, deeper, bolder and more biblically accurate with a greater understanding of the text and application to God’s people, not shallow and repetitious and pulled into false teaching as is the case with the one who does not study or is not able to prepare in a literary fashion. Also, the pastor who is able to study grows personally in his spiritual life through his understanding of the Word.

When I asked what Kenyan pastors think of a preacher who preaches from only one biblical passage, using it for all of his points and applications, I was fascinated to see the group was quite divided. About half responded that Kenyans feel this preacher is not well-prepared, has little understanding of the Bible, is limited in his abilities, is a boring communicator, is not filled with the Spirit and this style is quite uncommon in Kenya. The other half responded strongly that this is the best way of preaching, it shows that the pastor is well trained, has a deep understanding of the Word, is disciplined with the text, has done good study, and that this style is desperately needed in Kenya although it takes more time to do this study.

When I asked questions about the diffusion of this innovation, such as how literary training in Bible study will best spread to Kenyan pastors, what will need to happen, who will need to be in favor of it and what will help it spread, responders shared first and foremost that multiplying the training to others (inside and especially independent pastors outside the AIC denomination) will help ground the new study habits and will help the innovation to diffuse well and quickly. In addition, multiple trainings will be required to reinforce new patterns, and having denominational and peer support will be important. Obviously, a high level of commitment on the part of the first level trainers will be critical, and making the first training a model for others to follow will be helpful. Ultimately, God’s Spirit will need to bless the work. Regarding what challenges are to be expected, participants responded most frequently that financial/economic challenges will need to be overcome, and secondly there will be time and commitment limitations since pastors are busy people. Also, several responders shared that pastors are not hard-working people, and making this transition will require hard work, which is illuminating. A few shared that there is the possibility of denominational push-back about why this training is better than other types of training.

In summary, from these helpful interviews and surveys, we may conclude that participants deeply desire the innovation of literary training in how to study and understand the Scriptures for use in sermon preparation and delivery, moving from oral learning to literary learning, and this innovation is highly recommended. At the same time, a strong segment of pastors have already begun, or perhaps even completed, the process of this transformation, particularly within certain groups of better educated denominations, such as AIC. It remains to be determined how East Africans or other Kenyans in general will respond to exegetical Bible study and expository preaching on the part of their pastors, since many do not read, do not bring or use Bibles in church, and half the group of pastors shared that expository preachers are not viewed favorably in their context (assuming they understood the question correctly). We can expect challenges in diffusing the innovation, but the Kenyans believe that through multiplying the trainings to other pastors, and building high commitment to new patterns, struggles related to finances and time may be overcome so that the change spreads to many other pastors.