

The Oral Tradition and its Implications for Contemporary Preaching

Belden C. Lane

Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri

People had gathered for mass in a Cameroon Village in West Africa. The liturgy was being conducted in Ewondo, an African language native to the area, when suddenly the drawn-out, piercing shriek of a woman was raised above all the other sounds of prayer. This compelling cry both unnerved and fascinated the listeners, as it always did. Known as the *oyenga*, it was an integral part of the liturgy, repeated several times—and always only by a woman. It seemed to say to the others:

Pay attention! Something of incomprehensible significance is going on. The meaning of it has seized me, and I am beside myself in my womanly realization of what it is. Only women really know. But, all of you, pay attention. Nothing else matters.¹

Walter Ong, S.J. remembers the oral impact of the Ewondo mass when he first heard it and was struck so deeply by the primitive power of orality within it. Probably no one has done as much as Walter Ong himself in trying to make us aware of the power of language as it moves through oral, written, and electronic transformations in the history of human speech. His work needs to be more widely known and its implications made explicit not only for the broader hermeneutical dimensions of Christian faith, but for the preaching task in particular.²

The sound of the woman's cry erupting out of the mythic context of worship can exemplify for us the impulse of Christianity itself for expression in speech. Christian faith is inexorably driven to language. As Heidegger well knew, language is the house of being. The more signs and names and ways of communicating we have, the more we are awakened to the fullness of being—made aware of our world and the possibilities for us within it. My primal human experience is often that of a whimpering, speechless child, yearning for ways to "in-word" the mystery of my experience. Amos Wilder found in the New Testament an impulse of Christianity toward pulling us out of speechlessness, into completely new forms of expression. He saw the early Christians to have brought forth not only new ideas, but also new vocabulary and oral patterns, new literary forms and styles. Even glossalalia is an example of the early Christians' search for a speech form commensurate to the awesome experience which was theirs. William Blake grasped this drivenness of Christianity to expression when he said that no one who is not an artist can hope to be a Christian.

This spontaneous burst into language in every conceivable form is found initially in Christianity in its distinctively oral character. As Amos Wilder em-

phasized, the New Testament evinces a high degree of residual orality. It shows the marks of having originally flourished by word of mouth, with all the immediacy and extemporaneity which that entails.³ The Gospel of Mark is filled with examples of direct speech, redundancies, repetitions, and the use of the historical present—all rhetorical marks of an oral background. One still hears the power of the voice echoing through the epistles of Paul. He writes reluctantly, wishing he were there in person, talking to the churches. He says to the Galatians (4:20), "I could wish to be present with you now and to change my tone [of voice], for I am perplexed about you." One can see him grimacing and turning in his chair as he writes. He admits to the Corinthians that his speech had not been marked by a polished literary form, but was instead a demonstration of the spirit (the breathed utterance) and power (1 Cor. 2:4). Not until Clement of Alexandria in the late second century, argues Wilder, did Christian writings begin to echo the literary style of Graeco-Roman rhetoric. The new speech forms of early Christianity largely followed the characteristics of Christ himself—humiliation and incognito.⁴ Content was wed to form; incarnational theology joined with the oral language of kenosis.

The transition from this original and primarily oral proclamation to the written gospel has been studied more carefully in the last several years by biblical scholars making use of literary criticism and especially studies on the nature of the oral tradition.⁵ Most recently, Werner Kelber has explored the implications of all this in his study of the orality behind the Gospel of Mark. He points up the failure of Bultmann and much of form criticism to grasp the deep discontinuity which exists between oral and written modes of communication. Markan textuality brings about a freezing of the oral life which had characterized the pre-canonical synoptic tradition.⁶ The transformation from oral expression to writing will always bring with it subtle but important shifts in nuance. A consciousness of these will be crucial to the hermeneutical task of explicating the written text. But such an awareness will be just as important in completing the hermeneutical circle by turning the text back into orality through preaching. This movement from the original, immediate orality of the kerygma *through* its being incorporated as text in the biblical record, and then *back* to the engaging evanescence of orality once more in preaching is central to Christian faith. It is a movement from the primal language of raw experience to critical intelligibility and back again. Paul Ricoeur speaks of it as a passing from an original naivete, through a necessary "hermeneutics of suspicion," to a "second-naivete."⁷ While he doesn't relate this to the particular dynamics of oral and written expression, the connection is readily apparent. The relationship between orality and writing in early Christianity, the reciprocal tasks of textual analysis and preaching, and one's own existential journey from pre-critical to post-critical experience are all involved here.

What is extremely important in this process, as Ricoeur and Ong both observe, is that the secondary orality or "second-naivete" to which one finally comes is never simply a return to the pre-critical, pre-written experience of the past. One can't go home again. In looking at the importance of the oral tradition for contemporary preaching, we do not want to suggest that one can (or would even want to) return to some golden age of the primitive oral experi-

ence. Robert Bellah cautions against such a “paleolithic revival.” Our need is to rediscover the energies of an oral and mythic world, only by passing through a post-critical faith to renewed mystery.

Characteristics of Oral Consciousness

With this in mind, let us go on to inquire about the dynamics of that oral consciousness which, in many ways, characterized the experience of early Christianity. Implications can then be drawn for the preaching task, as it seeks to replicate something of that experience in a modern, critical, and visual-oriented setting today.

1. *The Power of Sound as Oral Touch.* Hitler said that “all epoch-making revolutionary events have been produced not by the written but by the spoken word.” He knew that sound carries a peculiar force. It often can generate that sense of *mysterium tremendum* which Rudolph Otto saw to be the essence of the Holy. In the mystical tradition of Islam it is thought that if the right word were found and spoken, the universe would disappear in a moment. Certainly it is the case that a horror movie without sound would never work. Sound is the bearer of the uncanny. I’ve had the experience of missing a visual cue in a horror movie (not seeing the hand of the killer strike out, for example), but then finding myself frightened ever so much more by the screams in the audience around me—because the *sound* carried even more fear than the *sight*. Many of us remember the delightful terror we felt as children listening to “The Shadow Knows” on radio. There is power in the voice. The history of preaching is filled with stories of people who communicated effectively even when some of their listeners could not understand the language they spoke. This was the case with Vincent Ferrer in Counter-Reformation Spain, George Whitefield in the Great Awakening, and Howard Thurman speaking to certain Native Americans. Their body language and the very force of the sound itself was enough to make them understood.

There is a power of sound that approximates a sense of oral touch. Echoing through the cochlea of the inner ear, its effect is kinesthetic as well as psychic and imaginative. Certain monastic spiritual traditions in the middle ages recognized this as they emphasized a form of meditative prayer known as “active (or acoustical) reading.” The oral pronunciation of the Scriptures as they were read was felt to be an integral part of the absorbing or mastication of the divine words—letting them echo through the whole body. The sound carried almost a nutritive quality. It was said of Peter the Venerable, the great monk at Cluny, that “without resting, his mouth continually *ruminated* the sacred word”—like a cow chewing its cud.⁸ In an age when we don’t read aloud any more, when speed reading technologists specifically warn against moving our lips when we read, it may be difficult for us to recover this experience which ancient monks encountered with the Scriptures as sound.

2. *The immediacy of the Word as Passing Event.* A second characteristic of orality is the ephemeral texture of the spoken word. Oral speech is a “happening,” says Walter Ong, with the “hap” irretrievably lost by the time one gets to the “pening.” Homer’s “winged words” lived their own brief moment on

the poet's tongue and then were lost. The spoken word, therefore, is always a living event; it can never become a preserved record in the same way as the written word. In an oral culture this offers great advantages as well as some disadvantages. It means that communication will be intensely contextual. The speaker can make adjustments to the listeners' response, stopping to answer questions, responding to nods and puzzled looks. The communicating event has vivid and immediate impact. But the difficulty will be a continual problem with permanency. The word evaporates as quickly as it is said. Things can be remembered only if they are constantly repeated. Memory, therefore, becomes crucially important in the oral tradition. Knowledge is lost if it is not faithfully retold.

Albert Lord, in his classic study of epic poets singing their tales in the village tavernas of Yugoslavia, documented the phenomenal memory of story-telling bards in an oral culture.⁹ Like tribal griots in West Africa, they could reproduce hour after hour of memorized material, coded in formulaic patterns and tending to focus on the colorful, provocative, and agonistic. In an oral setting, memory latches on to the extraordinary and unusual. It is this reality that John Dominic Crossan sees to be essential in grasping the paradoxical structure of many of the parables of Jesus.¹⁰ In typical oral fashion, Jesus spoke so as to stimulate remembrance and engagement. To teach as Jesus taught is to reckon with the evocative and elusive nature of speech.

Again this may be largely foreign to us in a culture where we have learned to emphasize the permanence and consistent exactitude of the written record. Today the photocopy machine functions for us as silent bard, its literal precision taking the place of unpredictable, personal intonation.

3. *The Effervescence of Speech as Impulsive Expression.* Another mark of speech is its bubbling spontaneity. From the lalling of infants to the experience of brainstorming sessions in a circle of friends, we are made aware of the copious flow that characterizes the spoken word. Our whole family was fixed with fascination when our two-year-old son began rolling syllables off his tongue, telling us involved stories, broken occasionally by his bursting into laughter at what he had said, when all the while he spoke not a single intelligible word. Speech is like that; it comes with ease. We've all experienced intense conversations where exciting ideas were shared and we wanted so much to write things down, but were afraid to interrupt the magic, lest the act of writing would stop the flow. Walter Ong compares this tension between orality and writing to the Freudian stages of psychosexual development. At the oral stage one is free from constraint and pressure—speech flows out in joyous abandon. But the anal stage brings with it a new discipline as muscles learn consciously to constrict. The muscles of the hand in writing, as well as the sphincter muscles, are engaged in a new search for control.¹¹

One is often struck by the contrast between effervescence and control in oral and written cultures when experiencing the way myth is ritually conveyed in Native American religion. Joseph Cahill of the University of Alberta speaks of an opportunity he had to attend a rare ritual practiced among certain tribes in British Columbia. He was told beforehand that it was an entirely oral event and that no one should try to write anything during the ceremony. Yet as it

began, he became so deeply moved by what he witnessed that he was driven to make a few notes so as not to forget what occurred. Being a creature of linear, visual consciousness, he found it hard to rely on the oral story's power to remember itself in him. He was constrained to preserve it in writing. As he surreptitiously tried to put his pen to paper, however, he found that he could not move his fingers, no matter how hard he tried. It was as if a strange force stayed his hand. At the same moment, the Indian leader of the ritual, whose back was turned to him, said that he could feel someone trying to write and that this should not be done. Cahill says that never in his life was he more forcibly impressed by the power of the oral tradition.

4. *The Community of Story as Shared Experience.* A final characteristic of oral consciousness is its keenly communal quality. Speech is by nature social. It resonates from the deep interior of the one speaking to the interior of the person addressed, opening them both to a profoundly shared experience. The part of the body from which speech comes, said Whitehead, demonstrates how "voice-produced sound is a natural symbol for the deep experiences of organic existence."¹² Vision, by contrast, can be very impersonal and unable to penetrate exteriors. It makes surfaces of what it confronts. As a result, one soon responds to the prolonged stare of a stranger with acute anxiety and even anger. Only when the stranger *speaks* may there be, for the first time, an onset of mutuality.¹³ The spoken word is a vehicle for community. I've always been attracted, for example, to the reading rooms of public libraries—those centers devoted to the isolated reader and yet continually (and for myself, delightfully) interrupted by the shared chuckles or moans of people responding unconsciously, but orally, to what they read. The vocalization is often an entree to conversation and sharing—a way of escaping the isolation of the detached, individual reader.

Perhaps nowhere is this propensity of the spoken word for community better heard than in black preaching and in storytelling. When a very good storyteller, like Jackie Torrence, for example, is working with a small group of people, it's not uncommon for one to notice that the entire group begins unconsciously to breathe together with the teller. The story makes of them all a "con-spiring" community. Observers from James Weldon Johnson to Bruce Rosenberg have documented the ability of the call and response pattern in black preaching to evoke an extraordinary sense of truth bursting into event as it is received by the congregation.¹⁴ The reciprocal nature of speech pulls it toward shared encounter. "This give-and-take between spoken words and audience pressures," says Werner Kelber, "generates the homeostatic balance, a continuous process of adjustment of language to communal expectations, of social to linguistic realities."¹⁵ This is entirely lost, of course, when the message is made textual and ceases to be directly responsive to audiences.

Implications for Preaching

Having briefly outlined several characteristics of oral transmission, let us then ask about the implications of this for the contemporary preaching task. If these marks or orality are to be understood as underlying the gospel at its

inception in the pre-canonical synoptic tradition—before the message is preserved (and subtly altered) through writing, then how do we complete the hermeneutical circle by bringing the Word to oral life once again in preaching? How can we recover the impulse of early Christianity to language, especially to the frenetic immediacy of the oral experience? Three implications can be suggested.

1. *The Preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.* This theme, coming out of the Second Helvetic Confession, takes on new significance in the context of the oral tradition.¹⁶ The *preached* Word, as it assumes all the risk and impermanence of shared sound, is declared to be nothing less than the very Word of God. In fact, the confession goes on to affirm the inward illumination of the Spirit as relating to this oral process itself, rather than to the written text of Scripture. This is a phenomenal declaration, ratifying the oral power of the Word in one of the Reformed Churches' most respected written symbols. Our tendency today, however, is to have neglected the particular significance of preaching as an oral art. It is often learned and exercised almost exclusively in a written fashion. Most preaching is a form of practiced reading, carrying with it all the plodding linearity of writing. As products of Western higher education, most of us have learned to speak the way we write. But the oral tradition may force us to rethink the dimensions of consciousness involved in our use of manuscript preaching, for example. Black preaching, with its richly oral and contextual nature, has to remind the rest of the church that preaching is not just an extension of the written experience of Scripture. It bears its own unique life and power.

2. *Parabolic Language is a Quintessentially Oral Form of Speech.* C. H. Dodd's celebrated definition of a parable suggested that it left a certain confusion about its exact meaning so as to tease the mind of the listener into active participation. Werner Kelber goes on to suggest that this phenomenon of parabolic language is initially profoundly oral.¹⁷ The provocative, agonistic edge of the parabolic jars its listeners into response. It makes the message easily remembered. And, as the parable is recorded and passed on in writing, it almost invariably loses the sharpness of its oral form. Crossan argues that a parable through time tends to become mythic, in the sense that Levi-Strauss understands myth to be the reconciliation of opposites. That which originally seeks to "make strange" the familiar, upsetting the listeners' structure of expectation, is gradually dissolved into the commonplace, becoming a means by which tensions are eased. Thus, the parable of the Good Samaritan, with its original attack upon the exclusivist mentality of first-century Judaism, becomes by the time of Augustine a mythic allegory of the sinner's journey through life to death. The process of written transmission has severely dulled the edge of the original oral experience.¹⁸

Preaching, therefore, ought at least in part serve to recover those parabolic dimensions of the gospel which have become commonplace through over-familiarity with the written text. The parabolist uses the language of surprise and intrigue to force his or her hearers into supplying their own meanings. The truth is left open to that participation of listeners in the completion of meaning which is native to the oral tradition. This means, of course, that effective

preaching will not try to say everything, being exhaustively comprehensive and balanced. It will instead be richly indeterminant, using all the possibilities of oral expression to tease the mind into entering its mystery. Emily Dickinson said it well:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

3. *The Act of Listening is Part of the Act of Preaching.* A final implication of the oral process for the preaching task relates to the active reception of the spoken word by the body of listeners present. As we've seen, communication in the oral tradition is a uniquely shared encounter. Active listening is as important to the process as is active speaking. The storyteller makes use of a whole para-language of facial expression, tone of voice, phrasing of words, and body language. In turn, he or she is accustomed to receiving back from the listeners a response given through a similar para-language. Describing the dynamics of effective oral interpretation, Charlotte Lee observes:

When the interpreter is responding empathetically to his material, he gives physical cues to his hearers, who in turn respond by muscular imitation. This muscular imitation helps intensify their emotional response.¹⁹

Much more is involved here than merely the subtleties of unconscious behavior modification. The very truth of the communication is secured by this mutual interaction of teller and receiver. Most of this tends to be lost, however, in a context of preaching where the sermon is frozen event, delivered in the pulpit the same way it was written in the study. Much of contemporary preaching would probably not be substantially different in the complete absence of a congregation. Even the sophisticated techniques of televised preaching offer only an artificially-created degree of listener response. The use of laugh tracks, spliced-in applause, supporters planted in the studio audience, and closed-circuit intervention to the faces of ardent and convincing listeners may suggest, but ultimately fail to capture the immediacy of the oral experience. The hermeneutical circle is brought to a close only as the message bursts into new life in the active, immediate reception of its listeners. Martin Luther recognized this when he wrote:

In the New Testament the sermons are to be spoken aloud in public [in a animated tone] and to bring forth in terms of speech and hearing what was formerly hidden in the letter and in secret vision. . . . That, too, is why Christ himself did not write his teaching, as Moses did his, but delivered it orally, also commanded to deliver it orally and gave no command to write it. . . . For that reason it is not at all the manner of the New Testament to write books of Christian doctrine, but there should everywhere, without books, be good, learned, spiritually-minded, diligent preachers to draw the living word from the ancient scriptures and constantly bring it to life before the people, as the apostles did. For before ever they wrote, they had preached to and converted the people by word

of mouth. . . . That books had to be written, however, is at once a great failure and a weakness of spirit that was enforced by necessity and not by the manner of the New Testament.²⁰

Luther is concerned here to preserve the vitality of the Word of God as living event. His is the perennial concern of preaching in the church. Perhaps the post-critical recovery of the oral tradition and its power may help to realize that end.

NOTES

¹ Walter J. Ong, "Mass in Ewondo," *America* (September 28, 1974):150.

² Ong is University Professor of Humanities, English, and Psychiatry at Saint Louis University. His books include *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, Inc., 1982), *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), and *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Culture and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

³ Amos Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), chapter one on "The New Utterance."

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁵ See especially the work of Robert Cully and Werner Kelber, including Cully's *Semeia 5: Oral Tradition and Old Testament Studies* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976) and Kelber's "Mark and Oral Tradition," in *Semeia 16: Perspectives on Mark's Gospel* (S.B.L., 1980). These draw on some of the earlier work of Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1961), Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), and Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

⁶ Werner Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 347-358, and the same author's *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), chapter two on "The Conflict of Interpretations." Cf. Sallie McFague's *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 119-122.

⁸ Jean LeClerq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 89-91.

⁹ The work of the Lord and his mentor, Milman Perry, is reviewed in Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance, and Social Context* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹⁰ John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Toward a Theology of Story* (Allen, Texas: Argus Communications, 1975), *Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), and *In Parables* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973).

¹¹ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 92-110.

¹² A. N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), 32.

¹³ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 71-74.

¹⁴ James Weldon Johnson, *God's Trombones* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), and Henry Mitchell, *The Recovery of Preaching* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 74-95.

¹⁵ Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel*, 92.

¹⁶ This reformed confession of faith, written by Heinrich Bullinger in the 1560's, discussed the preached word in its first chapter, paragraph four. Cf. Edward A. Dowey, Jr., *A Commentary on the Confession of 1967 and an Introduction to the Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 201-213.

¹⁷ Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel*, 62, Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Scribners, 1935), 5. Note that even the parables of Kierkegaard, Kafka, and Borges are marked by narrative economy, possess an almost haunting sense of sound, and can be read aloud

with great power.

¹⁸ Crossan, *The Dark Interval*, 80-128, and Norman Perrin, *The Language of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 89-181.

¹⁹ Charlotte I. Lee, *Oral Reading of the Scriptures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974), 24-25.

²⁰ Quoted in Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 312, n.1.