Communicating Effectively to Non-Readers
# Communicating God's Message in an Oral Culture
*by Rick Brown*

## Introduction

It is only natural for us to bring to our work the bias of our own ways of thinking, learning, and communicating. But unless we can adapt our communications to our audience, we will limit our audience to those who think as we do. The people we want to reach, however, include many for whom reading is not an important feature of everyday life. In fact, they prefer oral modes of communication. Many are non-readers who are more at home with oral communication methods. Research and experiments over the last two decades have shown that oral communicators learn best when these methods are used. In this paper[1] we will look at some of the principles that need to be understood and their implications for communicating God's Word.

Since its publication in 1982, the standard work contrasting oral- and print-oriented communicators has been *Orality and Literacy: the Technologizing of the Word,* by Prof. Walter J. Ong. This book has become the standard work in its field and an inspiration for new lines of inquiry in fields as diverse as history, cognitive psychology, education, literary criticism, and Biblical studies. I will draw often on the insights from this book in the discussion that follows.

## Definitions

To begin with, let's define some terms:

- *Print communicators* are ones who depend on reading and writing for the communication of important information. A culture characterized by such communications is called a print culture.[2]

- *Oral communicators* are ones who depend mostly on verbal, nonprint means to learn, to communicate with others, to express themselves, and to enjoy a story. A culture in which oral communications are typical is called an oral culture.

It is helpful to distinguish at least two categories of oral communicators:

- *Primary oral communicators* are people in cultures with little or no literacy. Examples include traditional peasant and nomad societies, as well as some poor urban communities.

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- *Secondary oral communicators* are ones who depend on electronic audio and visual communications (see Ong 1982:135). Reading and writing are not highly valued. In such a culture, the elite are functionally literate, and they enable the rest to acquire their information and entertainment from the electronic media.  Most communities in the developing world are becoming secondary oral cultures.

Note that a general trend in history has been the progress from primary orality to some literacy with residual orality, and from there in some cases to a print-oriented culture.[3] The modern trend is to move on to secondary orality, to a post-literate or multi-media culture,[4] in many cases skipping the stage of print-orientation. The Arab world, for example, has basically become a multi-media culture. As Viggo Søgaard reminded a conference of the Forum of Bible Agencies,

> We are kidding ourselves when we say we are reaching the world by providing printed Scripture only, when less than half of the world's people know how to read. It is important to choose your medium based on the needs of your audience. (quoted in Macdonald 1997.17)

- *Implication: Since people learn best when information is presented in a way to which they are accustomed and that suits their learning style, media specialists need to know their audience. To communicate effectively with members of oral cultures, we need to communicate in ways appropriate for oral communicators. We also need to make good use of non-print media.*

A person from a print orientation might object, saying that the people need a book to look things up in, but as Jim Slack is fond of saying, oral communicators don't look things up; they retrieve them from their memory.[5] The print-oriented person is amazed that an oral communicator can happily listen to a tape repeatedly, day after day, and even more amazed at how quickly he or she memorizes it. In oral cultures people easily memorize large portions of Scripture.[6] This can be seen in Muslim cultures. As Graham notes, the Quran was transmitted orally, and its written form has served mostly as an aid to its oral recitation and memo-

rization; traditional Islamic education of children has stressed memorization of the entire Quran, and it is in its chanted recitation that the Quran is most perceived as Scripture (1987: x, 80, 88-92, 98, 101). Graham also notes that the holiest scriptures of the Hindus and Zoroastrians were transmitted in oral form alone, while lesser works were written down (1987:4,66).

## Oral communicators learn and retain information differently from print communicators

It is hard for highly literate people from print-oriented cultures to understand how oral communicators think, learn and communicate. Ong notes that

> Thought and expression in oral cultures is often highly organized but calls for organization of a sort unfamiliar to and often uncongenial to the literate mind (Ong 1982: inside cover).

Unfortunately it often happens that a print-oriented communicator wrongly expects that the oral communicators in his or her audience will understand logical, analytical, and abstract ways of thinking, or he expects that sermons and radio programs designed for a print-oriented audience can be translated and used effectively with an oral audience. But this is not usually the case.[7]

So how do people think and learn in oral cultures? It may help to highlight the differences between the two types of cultures, as researched by Ong. Oral communicators learn by hearing, while print communicators learn by seeing and reading. Oral communicators think and talk about events, not words. They "use stories of human action to store, organize, and communicate much of what they know." They learn by watching and imitating, by listening and repeating. Memorizing is easy for them. They memorize things handed down from the past: proverbs, stories, sayings, and songs. Print communicators, on the other hand, think and talk about words, concepts and principles. They learn by reading, studying, classifying, comparing and analyzing.

*When taught in a narrative format, retention of information by oral communicators can be several times higher than when taught in a lecture format.*

They are poor at memorizing and need to look things up in books and write them down in notebooks.[8]

In general, then, oral communicators acquire and store information as concrete events related to one another on a relative time line. If they are asked to describe a person's character, they are more likely to tell a story that reveals his character rather than to describe him with abstract adjectives.

It is significant that when information is taught in a narrative format, retention of the information by oral communicators can be *several times higher* than when taught in a lecture format, as noted by Slack (1991: 9-10):

> Oral communicators…and societies learn mostly by means of storying and symbols. This is true in every area of their lives. Research among oral communicators and rural-oriented peoples, whether in the mountains or in cities, produced the following data. Retention among these types of people seldom was higher than 29% of the knowledge shared when communicated by means of logical and systematized outlines of the information. However, when a storying or chronological teaching method was used, retention rose to at least 75-80%.

- *Implication: Messages are more likely to be enjoyed and remembered if they are presented in narrative forms, such as stories, rather than in non-narrative forms, such as lectures.*

- *Further implication: Since oral communicators depend on memory rather than reference books, important texts, such as translations of Scripture or stories from the Bible, should be phrased in a way that makes the text easy to say, listen to, recite, and memorize.*

## Oral communicators learn from real-life, people-oriented events

Oral communicators learn information by relating it to real or imagined events in human life. They think and talk mostly about events and people, seeing

these things in their natural, familiar context. Genealogies matter to them because they set real people in the stream of history. Print communicators, on the other hand, learn information as abstract principles, with events added as examples. They can talk or write objectively about facts, thoughts and feelings, using abstract terms, and they can describe the history of an idea or ideology. They like lists, but they pay little attention to genealogies.[9]
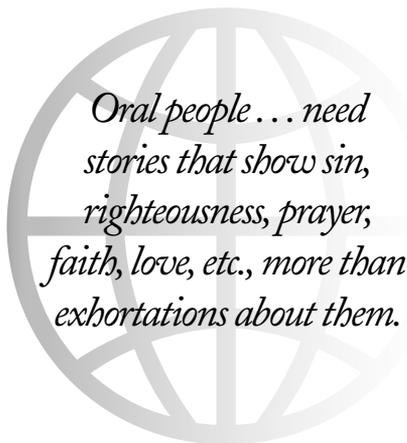
So oral communicators learn best from stories about concrete events to which they can relate, rather than from abstract, analytical exposition. Oral people appreciate narrative passages that illustrate God's qualities more than abstract statements about his qualities. They need stories that show sin, righteousness, prayer, faith, love, etc., more than exhortations about them. They also need a rough idea of where events take place in space and time, at least in relation to one another. This is at least one reason why the method called "chronological Bible storying" has been so effective.[10] In this method the communicator begins with creation, if not before, and leads the listener through the significant events of salvation history, one story at a time, in a chronological order.

A series of Bible portions appropriate for evangelizing oral communicators can be made more people-oriented by focusing on Bible characters, at the same time being careful to present the Biblical themes through the events that happen to these characters. By presenting the Scriptures in historical order as biographies, the Biblical message is made more attractive and more memorable. People who might never listen to lectures and sermons that contradict their worldview may nevertheless listen to stories or watch narrative movies that challenge their worldview. This is demonstrated by the large numbers of Muslims who have watched the film *The Passion of the Christ,* even though they have heard it said most of their lives that Jesus was never crucified.

- *Implication: We can encourage people to listen to the message with an open mind by using interesting stories, especially appropriate Scripture narratives and testimonies.*

The Old Testament is a rich treasury of biographical narratives. Not only are these interesting and easy to remember, but they give oral communicators a chance to feel that they have "been there," experiencing God's interaction with people, and thus beginning to acquire a more Biblical worldview. By the time they have listened to a series of Old Testament biographical portions, they will have developed an understanding of God and man that can enable them to understand the Gospels.

As Rodda (1992) points out, many Muslims are like the Jewish pair[11]

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on the road to Emmaus mentioned in Luke: they believe that Jesus was a good man and a powerful prophet, but they see no need for him to die as a sacrifice for sins, especially in such a disgraceful way. They might prefer a Messiah who simply forces people to obey God. Fortunately the pair going to Emmaus were already well-versed in the truths of God revealed in the Old Testament, and Jesus used this knowledge to lead them to understand the Gospel:

> Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. … Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" … "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel." … He said to

them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. [Luke 24:13-27 NIV]

Jesus enabled them to overcome their doubts by using the Old Testament to demonstrate the need for a perfect substitutionary sacrifice for sin. He mentioned Old Testament passages which foretold the Messiah's suffering and ultimate victory. So those who wish to communicate the Gospel account of Christ to an audience unfamiliar with the Scriptures might do well first to lead them through the foundational truths found in Old Testament stories. The Old Testament can, as it says in Galatians 3:24, "lead us to Christ."

- *Implication: By leading the audience chronologically through the events of the Old Testament, we can help them to acquire a more Biblical worldview and prepare them to understand the Gospel.*

This is not to say that we should ignore the audience's worldview. On the contrary, good communication starts by understanding what the listener knows and building on that. If the communicator is from a different culture, it may require some effort to really understand the audience, their beliefs, and their felt needs. It may also require some self-denial to begin to identify with the audience and to communicate with them on the basis of their own worldview.

- *Implication: Communication of a Biblical worldview will be more effective if it is freed from biases of our own cultural worldviews and based on a good understanding of the worldview of the audience.*

One way to encourage interest and openness to the Biblical stories is to present each story as relevant to some issue or question in life. In the case of recorded stories, this can be done through a short drama or dialogue cast in the audience's present-day setting. For example, an introductory setting can portray family or friends discussing a need or asking a question about God and man or talking about a famous

prophet. A variant of this approach is to produce a "soap opera" series of true-to-life stories, in which problems are addressed by telling a biblical story. Life Agape (CCC-Middle East), for example, has produced a series of 59 half-hour television episodes, each of which includes a re-enacted Bible story around 5 minutes long. (The series is called "Thirsty Hearts," and it is available for dubbing into other languages.)

Another consideration is to choose narratives and testimonies that describe events typical of the audience's own culture and felt needs. Not only do oral communicators learn themes more easily if they are connected with stories, they learn them most easily if the stories are similar to situations in their own lives.

Knowing the needs and concerns of the audience is a necessary prerequisite for effective communication, especially with oral, relational communicators. All types of media programs would do well to address the listeners' own concerns and felt needs, such as health concerns, etc. FEBA Radio has exemplified this with special broadcasts rushed onto air for the aid of those suffering war and civil unrest. Knowing the needs and concerns of the audience is a necessary prerequisite for effective communication, especially with oral, relational communicators. As Viggo Søgaard puts it, "if we do not know our audience and the needs of our audience, we really have no right to be on the air" (1993:139). He recommends a careful analysis of listeners' letters, surveys of listeners, and pre-testing of pilot programs (1993:142).

- *Implication: By choosing portions that relate well to relevant issues in the lives of the listeners, we increase the attractiveness and effectiveness of the Scriptures. The same principle applies to the selection of appropriate testimonies, stories, proverbs, and songs.*

## Non-narrative teaching is usually placed within stories

Oral communicators reason from real-life experience. When seeking to convey ideas or influence conduct, they normally tell stories about events that illustrate the point being made. Print communicators, on the other hand,

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build their arguments logically, using analysis and explanation. Lectures and sermons are generally organized in a logical progression of thoughts that could fit an outline.

In addition to stories, oral communicators relate well to proverbs, poetry, and parables, as long as they relate to real life. The books of Psalms and Proverbs, however, are collections. A collection is a kind of list, and oral communicators do not generally relate well to lists. But selections from these books can be made more attractive and more memorable by fitting them into stories. This is part of the chronological approach. For example, some of the Psalms can be presented within a story about David, giving the context in which they were originally written. The embedded Psalms come across as relevant parts of the story line, illustrating how David went to God in prayer or praise.

Oral communicators learn how to do things, not so much by formal study or how-to-do-it manuals, but by observation and mimicry. So by seeing how David spoke to God in a variety of situations, the listener learns how to pray, a rather important achievement. Similarly, verses from Proverbs can be used generously in telling the story of Solomon, especially at places where the narrative says people came to hear his wisdom.

When Baptist missiologists such as Jim Slack and J. O. Terry teach chronological Bible storying, they recommend embedding the expository selections within the narrative portions. In the Gospels and Acts, most of the exposition (teaching) is already associated with events in the narrative. Many passages from the Epistles, however, can also be embedded in a story based on Acts, particularly at points where the epistles fit chronologically into the historical account. A series of portions has been designed that narrates the stories of the Apostles and the early church by combining passages from Acts and the Epistles in a chronological fashion.

Effective radio preachers use narratives to illustrate the points they want to make. For example, in a message on forgiveness, the preacher might relate how Stephen forgave those who were stoning him. It can be more natural and effective, however, to begin with a narrative framework or a real-life situation, draw in the Scripture story, draw a moral lesson from the story, and apply that to the situation. For example, the program begins with a drama of a typical family situation in which forgiveness is needed. As one family member asks another what to do, the second one relates a narrative from the Bible that exemplifies forgiveness, and finally summarizes the moral of the story. This is then applied to the family situation.

- *Implication: Non-narrative teaching usually communicates best if presented within the framework of a story or real-life situation.*

## Dialogue and drama are highly valued

Oral communicators tend to communicate in groups, and they learn through interacting with other people. They cannot think about something for very long without discussing it with others. By contrast, print communicators tend to communicate one-to-one. They can learn on their own, thinking about something for a long time while reading or making notes.[12]

In some oral cultures one is not generally allowed to monopolize conversation for very long. If he or she continues, those present will start talking among themselves. People are rarely alone, usually in groups. If one of them is performing a song or giving a speech or they are watching television, the conversation keeps going. At the least, people talk about what they are watching or hearing.

In these cultures, the response to recorded media follows the same pattern. In a survey conducted by Trans World Radio, they found that their most popular radio programs were those which included drama

and dialogue, rather than one voice speaking for a long time. Hosanna–Faith Comes By Hearing has found that audio Scripture portions which are dramatized to some degree are more effective than ones which are simply narrated, because the listeners become more engaged and often immerse themselves into the story. Hosanna has a script that divides the NT into 250 roles but requires only 25 different voicers. A revision of the NIV Bible has been produced in fully dramatized form, and this could be a helpful resource for authors preparing Biblical dramas.[13]

On the other hand, if actors are lacking for the various parts, a very good storyteller can act out the parts and give a convincing sense that a drama is taking place. Storytellers used to be very popular, although the modern media are putting them out of business. But if a Scripture portion is merely read onto the tape without convincing dramatic effect, it will seem unnatural and uninteresting, and it may be difficult to memorize.

- *Implication: The use of conversation, dialogue, and drama in recorded Scripture portions can draw listeners, keep their attention, and help them remember what they heard.*

## How the Bible is ideally suited for oral communicators

Most of the Bible is set among oral peoples. The record of the Scriptures themselves indicate that most were transmitted orally before being written. In the Gospels, God has "spoken to us through his Son" (Hebrews 1:2). Jesus does not seem to have written any of his messages, but rather committed them to the memory of his disciples. There is little indication that Peter was literate, so we can believe he was a good memorizer of what Jesus said. Paul was literate, but he seems to have orally dictated many of his letters. They were intended to be read aloud in the churches (Col. 4:16; 1 Th. 5: 27), as was the Revelation of John.[14] In fact, it has been estimated that only 5% of the people in the New Testament churches were literate (Søgaard 1995), certainly no more than 10-15%, and the Word was presented to most of the

believers orally.[15] Oral transmission is also modeled in Nehemiah 8:8 below:

> And they read from the book, from the law of God, clearly; and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (RSV)

In his book *The Communication of the Gospel to Illiterates,* Weber (1957) describes his frustration in trying to teach reformed theology to illiterates in Indonesia, until he discovered that oral communicators can learn and teach quite effectively through the use of picturable narratives, drama, and symbol. Then he describes his

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"greatest discovery," that this is exactly what the Bible does! Rather than give a system of theology, the Bible describes the characteristics of God and man through a wealth of narrative "pictures"; it also presents the great drama of salvation, and it uses numerous symbols and symbolic actions, such as baptism, the breaking of bread, the cross, etc. (In fact, God's greatest revelation is not written or even verbal, but is presented in the life of Christ himself, who is the visible picture of the invisible God.) Steffen (1996), in his book on the advantages of storying the Bible, notes that the Bible is 75% narrative, 15% poetry, and only 10% "thought-organized."

The Scriptures are very personal and direct in approach, reflecting their oral nature. The authors say what they mean! This simplicity makes the message accessible to everyone, not just the cultured elite.

- *Implication: The Bible is very appropriate for oral communica-*

*tors, if presented in the way it presents itself.*

Charles Kraft (1988) made a study of the way God communicated in the Bible and observed ten principles of biblical communication. Among them are the following:

1. God shapes his communications in terms of the audience's frame of reference, or at least begins by addressing that frame of reference. He does not embrace their worldview but he does speak to it.

2. God usually addresses people personally, encouraging them to respond, especially in commitment to him.

3. God's message usually deals with concrete events and needs in the lives of those addressed.

- *Implication: Strategies for literacy, translation, promotion, and communication will be more effective if they are freed from biases of our own cultural values and based on a good understanding of the values and felt needs of the audience.*

- *Implication: By choosing portions that relate well to relevant issues in the lives of the listeners, we increase the attractiveness and effectiveness of the Scriptures. The same principle applies to the selection of appropriate testimonies, stories, proverbs, and songs.*

Bradshaw (2002) notes that oral cultures transmit their values and worldviews via the traditional stories they tell. These are the stories they live by, and change does not come until they have new stories to live by. Drawing on his extensive experience in community development, he makes the following observation (2002:12):

> Christian missions and development agencies have engaged in numerous efforts to manage cultural change throughout the world. To a large extent, however, the projects have failed because the theology and ethics that influenced them were propositional, not narrative, in nature. They were, therefore, powerless to produce sustainable change.

Ponraj & Shah (2003), on the other hand, document a case study showing the astounding effectiveness of the

chronological Bible storying approach in a state in India.

In Brown (2003:11) I wrote that "one of God's major purposes for the Bible is to communicate a different worldview to mankind," and I emphasized the importance of Biblical narratives in fostering such a worldview. Let's put that now into different terms: "God's purpose for the Bible is to give mankind a new story to live by, one that reflects truth as God alone knows it and love as God alone shows it." In that light the task of mission is to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to know God's story and to live by faith in it—to the glory of God the Father.

## Conclusion

Print-oriented communicators think, learn, and communicate in ways that are different from oral communicators. In developing ways to minister to an audience of oral communicators, we need to beware of our print-oriented bias and seek to make the presentation of God's Word suitable for an oral culture. Most of all, we need to offer to the peoples of the world a new story to live by—God's story. **IJFM**

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## Endnotes

1 Grateful acknowledgement is given to Val Carleton for her editorial assistance.

2 Ong frequently uses the terms 'literate' and 'literacy' in regard to print-oriented communicators and cultures, in opposition to the term 'orality'. This usage, however, is easily confused with other meanings of the term 'literate', so in this paper I have used 'print' or 'print-oriented' instead of 'literate', except in direct quotations. Ong also uses the term 'typographic', which means 'print-oriented'.

3 Ong describes the course of this development: "In Europe, primary orality lingered in residue…centuries after the invention of writing and even of print. Because of irregularities and poor legibility in handwritten manuscripts, as opposed to the easy readability of the printed page, chirographic (manuscript) cultures remained residually oral until superceded by typographic (printed page) cultures. It was the production of printed materials that eventually changed cultures and the way people think" (Ong 1982:119, 122). Initially, educated Europeans used writing and printing as a way to record spoken speech. They read the written page, and initially the printed page, to help them hear the message. Reading aloud was normal, usually with a group of listeners. "Eventually, however, print replaced the lingering hearing-dominance in the world of thought and expression with the sight-dominance which had its beginnings with writing but could not flourish with the support of [hand]writing alone." Words became symbols of meaning apart from sound, and reading became silent (Ong 1982:121, 122, 131).

4 "At the close of the 20th Century, we are witnessing the coming of a new age,

that we could call the 'Post-Literacy Age', in which even those who can read and write well are not doing so. The epoch of the audio-visual, termed by some 'the Multi-Media Era', has set in" (Ansre 1995).

[5] Most of the narratives and prophecies of the Bible were evidently preserved by memorization until they were written down. Homer was illiterate when he constructed the Iliad and the Odyssey, and they were passed on by illiterates who memorized them.

This is not to say that literacy is not valuable. When people are schooled to the point of becoming fluent readers, their cognitive processes develop in ways that would not be possible otherwise. Luria (1976) has shown that learning the basics of written communication can make a significant difference in how a person thinks and perceives. Ong (1982) elaborates on the many cognitive changes that result from becoming a fluent reader who has internalized print, and especially the increased consciousness that comes from learning to compose in writing.

Ong claims that the more rational states of consciousness and ways of reasoning that some people call "Western" or "domesticated" are in fact merely results of the shift from residually oral states of consciousness to deeply interiorized literacy (Ong 1982:29). "An oral culture simply does not deal in such items as geometrical figures, abstract categorization, formally logical reasoning processes, definitions, or even comprehensive descriptions, or articulated self-analysis, all of which derive not simply from thought itself but from text-formed thought" (1982:55). As for writing, it distances the writer from the audience, the knower from the known, and thus sets up the conditions for objectivity (1982:46); it also leads to more perceptive introspection and deliberation (1982:105) and enables logical, complex, well-structured compositions (1982:104). It should be noted, however, that research documented by Scribner and Cole (1982) have shown that these results are not dependent on the acquisition of literacy alone, as Luria claimed, but are dependent on the educational process itself.

[6] Of course, the emphasis on memorization comes from the practice of memorizing material passed down through generations, and this leads to an emphasis on tradition, a looking to the past. So it should not be surprising to find that oral cultures tend to be conservative and slow to accept new information. But repeated listening to new concepts can help to overcome this reluctance to accept new ideas and changes in worldview.

[7] If there is a single theme that dominates Ong's book, it is this: "Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness" (Ong 1982:78). By "writing" Ong means composition, not just copying or dictation.

[8] See Ong (1982:12, 41-43, 61, 89, 121, 140-141).

[9] Ong (1982:42-46, 105, 175).

[10] See Lovejoy et al (2001) for more on chronological Bible storying. Also see McIlwain's nine-volume series on this and the video by Dubby Rodda. As it happens, McIlwain's philosophy is based, not so much on the need for oral learning styles, but rather on the need to present extensive foundational teaching and background before the Gospel story is presented. Rodda takes his cue from Luke 24:25-27.

[11] It is not clear from the text whether this event involved two men or a man and a woman.

[12] Ong (1982:34, 69, 74).

[13] The Dramatised Bible, which is based on the NIV, costs £29.95 from the British & Foreign Bible Society, Stonehill Green, Westlea, Swindon, Wiltshire SN5 7DG, UK.

[14] "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it" (Rev. 3:1).

[15] Gamble (1995:10) summarizes the situation in the ancient church as follows: Only a small minority of Christians were able to read, surely no more than an average of 10-15 percent of the larger society and probably fewer. Thus only a small segment of the church was able to read Christian texts for themselves or to write them. Still, every Christian had the opportunity to become acquainted with Christian literature, especially the scriptures, through catechetical instruction and the reading and homiletical exposition of texts in the context of worship. This shows that one person was to read the book aloud, while many people listened.