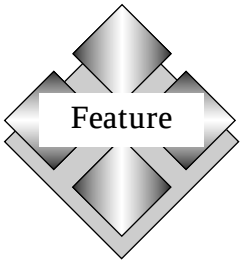

Christian Education and the Non-Book Culture

by Terry Dunnell

The non-book issue

This issue is slowly being understood as one of the major challenges facing the Church today and in the future. It is experienced in many churches across the land and particularly concerns young people and the way they learn, including their use of modern technology, recognizing the fact that they are increasingly using the visual. Books feature less and less. Many tools for evangelization and discipling rely heavily on the use of literature: i.e. tracts, invitations to special events, materials for use with children, young people and adults, hymn and song books, prayer books, etc. The impact of these on the non-book person will at best be minimal and at worst disastrous.

Literacy is not a pre-requisite for Christian discipleship and teaching

Those from a non-book culture who come to faith struggle against a bias towards the printed page. Literacy is not a pre-requisite for Christian discipleship and teaching. Think for a moment about Christians living before the birth of the printing press. How did they nurture their faith? Personal and daily Bible reading is a relatively new feature of the Christian tradition. Before it became more widely available, the Bible was generally read in community.

Christianity began in a non-book culture

I wonder if something quite fundamental happened when the printing press was invented. Prior to this momentous event, the focus of action in the church was around the altar. Here, in a mysterious fashion, symbol and drama came together with the story being told in words, in stained-glass windows and in paintings and carvings around the walls. Then came the printing press and the focus moved from the altar to the pulpit, from the concrete to the abstract and from story-telling to proposition.

How can the Bible continue to be the primary means by which God communicates with people, when their chief source of information is the TV set or the computer?

I am encouraged when I remind myself that Christianity began in a non-book culture and that the author and finisher of our faith was a great story-teller who also struggled with religion as an institution. Throughout history, the Church has survived without the masses of books now published each year. As we look at the growth of the Church in many primitive cultures, where illiteracy is the norm, we see explosive growth with little or no access to either the literature we assume as normal, or the training resources we take so much for granted.

What is the non-book culture?

It is not monochrome and it is not confined to one social class or grouping, to urban priority areas or to the vast wastelands of our housing estates. Only half the population read books for pleasure. In the United States, and with likely similarities here in the UK, it is estimated that some twenty one million Americans are illiterate out of a population of two hundred and forty-two million. Fewer than 25% of seventeen- to eighteen-year-olds read for pleasure. 90% of six- to fourteen year-olds find TV more appealing than books and 82% of this age-group prefer video games to reading. We are faced with a huge challenge when we think, for example, about Bible reading as the means of nurturing Christian life. How can the Bible continue to be the primary means by which God communicates with people, when their chief source of information is the TV set or the computer?

The necessity for developing multi-media tools becomes crucial, though it will be no easy task to develop electronic ways of exploring the Bible. The demands of the task and its costs will require a multi-agency approach with a willingness to develop partnerships and collaboration across theological and other traditional boundaries. We may have to move from the literary to the electronic - a shift as dramatic as from orality to literacy.

I sense some excitement as we stand on the threshold of this challenging new paradigm. Has the church begun to recognize these realities and to think seriously about developing creative alternatives? Is there a general awareness of the communications revolution which is gaining an even greater momentum?

Returning to non-book culture, there are two basic groupings:

a) The **technically illiterate** - those with learning difficulties, the dyslexic, etc.
b) The **functionally illiterate**, who can be divided into four sub-groups:
   i) the **highly literate** - those who read quality newspapers and technical books; highly educated yet seldom read a book for pleasure; many will struggle to read a chapter or two of the Bible.
   ii) the **general non-book** - will not read books at all but will read tabloid newspapers; will also read a range of magazines from specialist interest through to TV Times etc.
   iii) **young people** - will use books at school; at highest point of literacy; stop using books when they leave school.
   iv) **non-English-speakers** - especially women from ethnic groups.

The Church and the non-book culture

It is tempting to ask the obvious questions:

- What books are suitable for these people?
- How can we fit them into our churches?
- How can we persuade them to read the Bible for themselves?
- How can we transpose our concepts and ideas into forms which they can understand?

Instead we should be asking such questions as:

- How important is literacy in our society?
- How do people in this very visual age gather the information they need in order to make decisions?
- What methods will be most appropriate for evangelizing and discipling non-book people?
- How do we bring non-book leadership into the Church?
- What might the Gospel feel and look like from the perspective of a non-book person? How is it perceived?

Seeing things differently

I recall a discussion with young people in my days in Streatham. During the course of the evening, as the topic of authority was being explored, the issue of parents came up. At some stage it seemed right to read a verse which said something about the care of God as Father. When I had finished, one lad said to me, 'Tel - read that again will ya?' I did, and I had to read it four more times. Then he turned to me and said, 'Do you know what it feels like to hear that for the first time?' In all honesty I had no idea. I had slipped into a comfortable way of reading scripture from the topside. Here was someone who was reading it, and hearing it, from the underside and it made an unforgettable and lasting impact on me. I had to acknowledge and dismiss my presuppositions and assumptions, and my cultural captivity, and begin to learn to see things from the perspective of disadvantage and the underside. I had to move from the abstract to the concrete and begin to identify and discover those points and connections where Christian concepts get earthed, ring true and begin to take root in people's lives.

Do you know what it feels like to hear that for the first time?

Facing the non-book challenge

Engaging with the non-book issue is akin to peeling an onion. Working at one level uncovers another and the whole issue of learning demands some thinking and attention.

How do non-book people learn?
- conceptually or concretely?
- by listening or by doing?

How do non-book people communicate?
- theoretically or visually?
- in print or orally?
- through the grapevine or via an agenda?

People have different learning styles and our teaching methods need to take this into account

When I first began Sunday School teaching I was given a teaching resource. I made an assumption, and was not told otherwise, that if I taught as laid out in the book, then by the end of the lesson the group would have learned A, B and C. Not true! Yes, a few did learn, but others learned M, N and O whilst others learned virtually nothing, other than how to make life hard for the teacher. No one suggested to me that people have different learning styles and that our teaching methods need to take this into account.

If you ask any group of people to brainstorm on any topic there may be an initial feeling that they don't know very much. Yet when people begin to share their knowledge and experience, a mass of information comes together. It contradicts the assumption that, in order for learning to take place, you have to engage in serious and/or heavy study. We discover that we can learn from one another. To what degree do our church programmes and youth ministry groups encourage and enable such shared learning to happen?

Engaging with the non-book issue is akin to peeling an onion

Reading a book is an individual and isolating experience

Roy Dorey, presenting a paper at an Evangelical Alliance non-book event, said: 'The reassuring factor for me is that the Christian faith began in a non-book culture. It was a culture of the demonstration of truth through the lives of people, of the testing out of their experience against the declarations of God and of becoming a community which recognized its dependence on each other. We may be conversant with books but a large proportion of society is not. Even most of those who have a tertiary education are not likely to be people who read very much. The fact that most people, even those who can read, do not read is not a criticism of them. Reading a book is an individual and isolating experience. Sharing it afterwards and checking it out with other people is not. But reading is only one part of the acquisition of knowledge. We are not talking of 'non-book' communication as an interim stage, but as a permanent way of communicating that reflects the teaching methods of Jesus.'

We need to recover the lost art of story-telling

The power of story-telling

In this increasingly complex world of communication and technology and as part of a non-book strategy we need to recover the lost art of story-telling. The Christian story is no longer part of our culture in the sense that anthropologists use the word story. We, as a nation, no longer live by it. Yet the Church should be the community which, at least in theory, lives by the story.

Stories are more important than facts and introduce us to things beyond ourselves

Story is the language of experience and telling a story to a group or face to face with friends is totally different from reading a book. Just listen to the story-tellers in Native American or Aboriginal tribes! It is fun, engaging and spontaneous. It is emotional and evokes tears and laughter and, above all, it creates community. Stories will bind people together and the deeper the meaning of the story the deeper the relationship.

It is vital that the story of God connects with our own story for then revelation takes place

Stories have to reach us on a level at which we can respond. Stories are more important than facts and introduce us to things beyond ourselves. The stories of the Bible have a special meaning that makes them distinctive; as we retell the stories, God again becomes active and present. In all of this it is vital that the story of God connects with our own story for then revelation takes place. Through the story the Word of God becomes present.

Key principles

In whatever we do in facing the non-book challenge, some key principles remain:

- Involvement is essential and offers credibility.
- Learning without books is possible.
- Be sensitive about reading out loud in small groups.
- Use a modern Bible version and give page numbers rather than chapter/verse references.
- Look for or create tabloid-type resources.
- Do not use Christian jargon!
- Explain new ideas clearly and do not give out more information than is necessary.
- Ask open-ended questions (i.e. ones which cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no').
- Use stories - from the Bible, from other people, from the community.
- When using the OHP, use lettering that is clear and well-spaced.

Remember always: **Actions will speak louder than words**.

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