

William Carey International University

**Theology on the Move:
Storying
And the Fulfillment of the Great Commission**

World Christian Foundations-Module 2B

Research Paper

Written

By

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The most significant strategy in missions today is “the re-discovery of the importance of *storying* the Story of the great redemptive plan of God.” Missionary, author, and educator David Hesselgrave states, “No better way of communicating the gospel and discipling the nations has ever been, or ever will be found” (Steffen 2005: xv). God has revealed his nature and purpose in the chronological biblical narrative. Storying is a method of communicating the full revelation of the word of God to oral learners. In oral cultures storying is not simply effective; it is essential.

“‘Orality’ is about communication—in a genre and cultural style appropriate to those receiving the message. It’s a preference for learning (Montgomery 2007 Issue 14:1).” The significance of orality has been underestimated by many Western missionaries because they have understood their own learning style as the most effective. Orality is also a part of culture; it is a way of life. Story is “a golden key that is ready to unlock the door to the single most unreached culture today – the oral culture” (Montgomery 2007 Issue 14:1). Findings from the social sciences have shown that communication must be done with due consideration of cultural distinctives if it is to be effective (Malina 1982).

The God’s-story ministry is one of a growing number of mission organizations utilizing story for the sake of the kingdom of God. They believe that oral learners are to be enlisted for the accomplishment of the Great Commission. A brief video on the God’s-story website quotes Jesus, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” The viewer is asked, “Where are the workers?” and given this answer: “They are among the world’s oral learners, the eighty percent that cannot, or do not, prefer to learn from reading. These people learn best from stories” (<http://www.gods-story.org/sts/>). Campus Crusade’s vice-president, Paul Eshleman, is emphatic

about using story: “We have got to organize our evangelism and discipleship so we are telling stories to reach oral learners” (www.YouTube.com Paul Eshleman-Orality).

Biblical storying is a method that prepares disciples to be disciple-makers. Today’s missionaries will see oral learners making disciples of all nations when they teach historic Christian foundations according to a people’s learning preference. Theology, church history, biblical studies, and lessons from missionary praxis are important resources for making storying effective in the accomplishment of the Great Commission through oral learners.

The Veracity of the Bible

It is crucial for those who use biblical storying to be convinced of the veracity of the Bible. David Wells, Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, writes, “The prophets of the Old Testament and the Apostles of the New . . . take the modern breath away, for they had a certainty about the existence, character and purpose of God--a certainty about his truth--that seems to have faded in the bright light of the modern world” (Hesselgrave 1994: 8). Wells indicates that the “certainty” that shaped the response of the prophets and the apostles has been affected by modernity. Moderns, in their predisposition to philosophical and scientific analysis, can fail to appreciate and respond to the reality of the biblical stories. Those with a Western education have been particularly affected. Oral peoples, on the other hand, are accustomed to learning from story and judging the truthfulness of stories told within their community. Undistracted by abstract analysis, oral learners can focus on the coherency of the events and relationships in the story itself. Many of the explanations of the biblical events considered necessary by those with a modern education are non-issues for oral learners.

Oral learners may be more able to embrace the stories as true than their missionary counterparts but not because they are less able to evaluate and reason. James Paul Gee, in his article *From the Savage Mind to Ways with Words*, concluded that “literacy in and of itself leads to no higher order, global cognitive skills; all humans who are acculturated and socialized are already in possession of high order cognitive skills, though their expression and the practices they are embedded in will differ across cultures” (Morgan 2008). Biblical storytelling provides oral learners the opportunity to apply the kinds of reasoning expressed and practiced in their own culture.

By contrast Western missionaries have been taught a quantity of written postulations as a basis and a means for evaluation. Biblical studies are pursued in this frame of reference. Students are diligent to master theology through written materials that have this perspective and usually they employ it when they teach. Missionary Jim Slack carried out research that shows why exposition is not the best approach for communicating to most of today’s world:

Slack found that “nearly two billion (36.4%) of the world’s five and one-half billion people are oral communicators.” This means that nearly one third of the world’s population would have great difficulty in understanding the gospel if it was presented to them in a literate format. Not only this, Slack found that about two-thirds of the world’s population “possess an oral communication learning preference.” To make this figure even more startling, Slack explained that “over 90% of the world’s ministers are literates who use expositional formats when presenting the Gospel.” This has immense implications for Christian missions. In his research, Slack wrote that “to communicate effectively with oral communicators, presentations must match their oral communication learning preference.” (Morgan 2008:10)

In order for the majority of the world’s people to be candidates for enlistment as disciple-makers training in the Christian biblical foundations must be geared to an oral learner’s preference. The method must first be adequate to teach the source and nature of God’s revelation.

Oral learners need to be familiar with the Bible and understand how it came into being. Some aspects of how the Bible came to be are very familiar to oral learners: God spoke, God

acted, the word of the Lord came to the prophet. At other times God instructed men to write so that these things would be remembered and at this point oral learners may need to move beyond their own experience. But the writing and even the canonization of scripture is part of the story of God's revelation and can be told as a story. Carl F. H. Henry, one of the most prolific defenders of biblical authority, affirms that the writing down of the oral prophetic-apostolic proclamation should not diminish its living character. He hints that sometimes writing things down can make them less vivid. Telling the stories make them live anew, but storytellers must understand God's purpose in providing the written Bible: "The canonical Scriptures are God's providential gift to the church, preserving the community of faith from vulnerability to legend, superstition, unfounded tradition, corruptive invention and much else" (Hesselgrave 1994: 28). The written and oral aspects of the word of God must be appreciated and both can be taught using story.

Oral learners as well as those who prefer to learn from reading will truly hear God speak when they have the appropriate attitude toward his revelation. David Hesselgrave concludes that "everyone must come to Scripture with the free subordination of all human thought to divine revelation" (Hesselgrave 1994:33). The attitude of the prophets and the apostles is seen in their stories, which accompany their proclamation. Missionaries can use these stories to teach oral learners the nature of Scripture and the attitude with which storytellers are to proclaim it.

Laymen Must be Theologians

Theology is for all believers regardless of whether prefer oral or literate style learning. Laymen are to know and communicate about God. John H. Gerstner, author of *Theology for Everyman*, offers a definition: "A lay theologian is a person who has a true knowledge of God, which he understands in nontechnical, nonprofessional, nonacademic terms." He goes on to

affirm that “laymen sometimes think they do not need to be theologians,” but no one can be saved without the knowledge of divine truth or theology. He writes, “This truth of God must be loved, must be embraced, and must be yielded to if the person who has the saving knowledge is to be saved by it.” Attempting to teach theology as abstract truth is inadequate. Working with oral learners requires the abstract thinker to recognize the personal nature of a biblical theology. Gerstner affirms God’s way of making himself known with this reminder: “The truth of God is a person - a person who said, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:16). A true theologian is a person who knows the Person” (Davis 1978: 29). The personal aspect of theology is found in the events and relationships of the biblical narratives and storying is uniquely suited to provide oral learners a personal knowledge of God and his will.

A sound Christian lay theology extends beyond personal salvation to impact the world and its absence has serious consequences. History witnesses to the want of sound lay theology. One example was a regime that defended its agenda with an ethnocentric distortion of Christianity. Essayist and playwright Dorothy Sayers addressing her native England in 1940 exposed this dire situation, “Christendom and heathendom stand face to face as they have not done in Europe since the days of Charlemagne.” The Third Reich claimed to be the successor to the Holy Roman Empire but Sayers properly identified it with heathenism. She affirmed that theological issues were predominant, calling the escalating conflict a “quarrel about the nature of God and the nature of man and the ultimate nature of the universe . . . a war of dogma.” Sayers recognized serious errors in Hitler’s theology and warned those hesitant to oppose him; “We can easily persuade ourselves that the underlying dogma is immaterial. ‘Never mind about theology,’ we observe in kindly tones, ‘if we just go about being brotherly to one another it doesn’t matter what we believe about God’” (Davis 1978:27, 29). Christian nations, including

Germany itself, ignored Hitler's misguided theology long enough that he came close to imposing it on all of Europe. The Christian church cannot afford to settle solely for an emphasis on brotherhood if it would realize its calling. Oral cultures suffer from conflicts large and small originating from unsound theology. Sayers address, titled *Creed or Chaos?*, makes the point that to be careless about creed is to invite chaos. Sayers saw a weakness in the way dogma is commonly taught: "dogma expressed as doctrines can be so unintelligible to the laymen that they are not given a chance to believe" (Davis 1978:34). Creed and dogma are necessary but the form in which they are communicated must be adjusted if the laity is to be equipped. A set of stories, representing Christian doctrinal foundations, can function as a creed in a church of oral learners providing intelligible dogma to laymen.¹

Kenneth Prior, as Vicar of St. Nicholas' Church, Kent, England, affirmed the importance of the teaching ministry of the church. He observes that the practical nature of the Bible teaching is intended for the rank and file members of the church: "This means that a minister of the word of God, whatever the congregation with which he is faced, whether it be rich or poor, educated or uneducated, must teach. He may well of course adjust his method to fit in with the need and capabilities of those before him, but he still cannot evade his responsibility to teach the truth of God to those committed to his charge" (Davis 1978: 50). The need to adjust one's methods based on the capacity of the congregation, which Prior states casually is paramount in the case of literate pastors teaching oral learners. Literates from oral cultures who have been taught using Western educational models are some of those most resistant to adopting storying because they perceive the Western models to be superior. Missionaries greatly reinforce the legitimacy storying when they model it in their own teaching. Robert Saucy, Professor of Systematic Theology at Talbot Theological Seminary called for theology that is first understandable, then

¹ The Southern Baptist missionaries have produced a collection of biblical stories in Spanish (www.contare.org).

relevant, and finally life-transforming (Davis 1978:66-73). The affirmations of theologians Prior and Saucy could show pastors of oral learners who are hesitant to change that the superior method is the one that is understandable, relevant and life-transforming. However, even given the testimony of God's word, the justification of history, and the support of theologians, the task of equipping laymen in the mission environment remains a formidable one with its issues of language, cultural differences and entrenched patterns.

One of these challenges, language, is met in part through the scholarship and cultural understanding reflected in the Bible translations. These provide the raw material of theology for oral learners, but obstacles remain. Although thousands of Mayan Christians own a New Testament in their language relatively few can read it with comprehension.² It might be thought that providing the translated scriptures in audio format would be all that is needed for these oral learners to be impacted by God's word, but donated Mayan New Testaments on cassette sit unused. Efforts thus far to encourage those Bible reading and study have been largely unsuccessful. It is one thing to convince missionaries and the church leadership that every lay oral learner must be a theologian, but failing to provide a means to make them such could result in the resignation to settle for training a relative few who are oriented to literate learning. Storying provides the learning alternative that is accessible to all. In contrast to the results cited above, consider this testimony:

Oh stories!" exclaims Ramesh Sapkota, leader from Nepal. "I eat stories, sleep stories, drink stories, tell stories. Not only me—it is like a communicable disease. *Everyone* can tell stories. Blessed be God!"

The thread, that runs through testimony after testimony from this cadre of workers using narrative portions of the Bible as its mainstay, is a thrilling sense of discovery. Non-literate believers who never imagined they could be teachers, leaders or trainers, are seeing that the story of God empowers them. Literate leaders are finding that when they tell pure stories of the Bible, without extra commentary, but with questions and

² This and following observations on Mayan peoples come from the author's 20 years of experience as a missionary among them.

discussion instead, their disciples are hearing and learning as never before. (Montgomery 2007: Issue 16)

Story is a genre through which oral learners discover theology for themselves, an experience that creates a hunger for more. This approach emphasizing personal discovery demands a means to ensure sound biblical interpretation.

Teaching Appropriate Biblical Interpretation Principles

Laymen generally consider their Bible teachers to be the experts and expect them to interpret the Bible for them. Dependence on an "expert" precludes the development of the skills needed for personal study and application. Those who would teach others to study must model a learner's attitude in relation to scripture. In the handbook *Inductive Bible Study Explained*, Mary Graham suggests letting the story itself be the teacher. "The student of the Bible will seek to find out what the writers of Scripture knew and felt, and then express that, not adding or changing anything, but illuminating what is there" (Graham 1995). Biblical storying can effectively incorporate inductive Bible study methods.

"Simply the Story" (STS) workshops offered by the "God's-story" ministry teach the storyteller to prepare by reading³ a five to ten verse story aloud and then telling it from memory out loud. This process is repeated until the story can be recounted in one's own words with all its detail. This is a way of doing thorough observation of the text, the first step in inductive Bible study. Those listening to the story are observers; First as they hear the story, then by participating in retelling the story, and again while the storyteller leads the group in recounting all the details. In this way everyone learns the story accurately without embellishment.

The Bible, though made up of many individual stories, is the one story of God's unfolding revelation. In its historic scope and variety the student of scripture must consider that

³ Non-literate learners listen to someone else read the story or to a recording of the story.

which ties the stories together. Some scholars see a unifying theme in the kingdom of God and others in God's promises. Old Testament scholar and educator, William Kaiser, finds in Scripture an inner center or plan to which each writer consciously contributed which he called the promise/plan of God (1978:11). He recommends a biblical theology discovered by going through the Bible chronologically as opposed to using the organization of systematic theology which is a framework external to the biblical text (1998:12). In relation to storying this highlights the need for an overview of the Bible as the framework in which the individual stories can be properly understood. This approach is reflected in Trevor McIlwain's chronological teaching outline in which the whole story is kept in view as selected stories are told in phases. The first phase includes "the Old Testament revelation of God's holiness, His demands for perfection as revealed through the Law, and His terrible judgments on rebellious sinners." Then, through the story of the Gospels, Christ is presented as providing all that God's righteousness requires (McIlwain 1987:100). In six subsequent phases the whole Bible is reviewed twice using additional stories, once for new believers and again with emphases appropriate to maturing believers (McIlwain 1987:131). Placing the stories in their chronological-historical context and considering them as parts of God's unfolding plan provides bases for proper interpretation.

Additional steps in the inductive process move from observation to interpretation and on to application. In the STS course the storyteller learns to formulate questions, answerable from the story, and learns how to use these questions to walk others through these steps. The individual's responses to these questions indicate where they identify with the story. The storyteller pursues these points of identification with appropriate questions leading to personal application. In their book, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart define the task of exegesis as finding out what the text meant to those who originally

received it. They affirm, “One does not have to be an expert to do the basic tasks of exegesis well. The secret lies in learning to ask the right questions of the text” (Fee and Stuart 1993: 11). The use of questions aids understanding as the storyteller learns the story and then guides the listeners to understanding after the story is told. Perceptive use of questions facilitates insightful comparison of the cultures represented in the story and the culture of the interpreter.

William Larkin Jr., professor at Colombia Biblical Seminary and Graduate School of Missions, is the author of a book emphasizing cultural considerations in hermeneutics. He applies cultural considerations to each phase of biblical interpretation. Application questions can be answered only after having recognized the cultural context of the story in the interpretation phase. In the final phase of the inductive process, interpreters must determine whether the story has application in their context and how it is to be applied. The proper interpretation impacts the culture in the form of changes in thought, attitude, and behavior (Hesselgrave 1994:60-65). Biblical stories, told and retold with questions that bring out the cultural context, move oral learners to personal, contextualized applications.

Some would question whether sound interpretation and valid application will result from storying, criticizing story as susceptible to distortion and to the entrance of false teaching due to its oral transmission and lay interpretation. This is a valid concern since false teaching has arisen as a threat to true faith since the earliest days of the church. Swiss theologian Emil Brunner describes false doctrine and his proposed defense against it.

“The first root of dogmatics is the struggle against false doctrine. The sinful self-will of man takes the gospel and alters the content and meaning . . . the very words of the Bible are twisted and given alien meaning, and indeed, one which is directly opposed to its purpose. The Christian Church is in danger of exchanging the divine treasury of truth for mere human inventions” (Davis 1979: 79).

Brunner proposes “dogma” as effective for exposing false doctrine arising from the self-will of man. As means of grounding the believer in the truth, he recommends catechetical instruction. Catechisms, though commonly found in written form, were taught and re-taught until committed to memory. Stories too are memorable and stories that refute errors prevalent in a given culture, told and retold, would provide the community of faith the knowledge by which false teaching would be exposed. The danger of human invention distorting the truth exists in oral cultures, but a community grounded in the stories from a native language translation of God's word is equipped to recognize error and hold storytellers accountable.

A second objection to storying relates to the danger of error due to encouraging laymen to interpret the story and to make their own application. John J. Davis, in a summary statement on the nature of theology, observes that the danger of distorting the gospel is equally present in “heresy of tradition” as well as “heresy of innovation.” The “heresy of tradition” is locking God’s truth into one’s own cultural understanding (1979:181-182). Applying scripture based either on traditional cultural understanding or on one’s own whim equally promote heresy. It is precisely the training of oral learners in the use of inductive study principles and involving them in interpretation that provide the means for the biblical stories to be a source for preventing heresies. The potential for error, however, is a real and serious danger; one which affirms the need for dependence on the witness and superintendence of the Holy Spirit in biblical storying.

The Work of the Holy Spirit

Storytellers need orientation to the Holy Spirit’s involvement in the giving of God’s revelation and in all aspects of biblical storying. The Holy Spirit’s essential role in the giving of God’s word is taught in scripture: “No prophesy was ever made by an act of human will, but men

moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”⁴ In volume IV of his monumental work *God, Revelation and Authority*, Carl F. Henry gives the following description of inspiration: “That supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit whereby the sacred writers were divinely supervised in their production of Scripture, being restrained from error and guided in the choice of words they used, consistently with their disparate personalities and stylistic peculiarities” (Hesselgrave 1994: 31). Henry's propositions are true and need to be understood by oral learners who will tell God's story. It is the biblical events that show God as the revealer and the authority that provide the best way to teach this. The God who spoke through the prophets will be recognizable in the story as one who continues to supervise the transmission of revelation in a variety of formats.

The translation of Scripture into other languages is a process that calls for God's involvement. Bible translators, like the original authors, have abilities and liabilities that affect the expression of the word of God. Just as translators make use of best manuscripts in the original languages, storytellers rely on the Bible translations available to them. In light of the man's limitations, the need for the superintendence of the Holy Spirit in each step is clear. Anthropologist and translator Jacob Loewen gives this testimony: “I realized that not only had God's Spirit been active in the original giving of the word, but is still active in its transmission through translation into other languages.” Loewen states that his years working with the Bible Societies “enriched my sense of the ongoing presence and participation of God in the translation and communication process (Loewen 2000:249).” When a story from scripture is told in one sense it is translated once again, a process dependent on the presence and participation of God.

As oral translations of stories are told and inductive questions asked, those involved in the interpretation process need the illumination of the Spirit. Jesus anticipated this need in his promise to his disciples. Considering that he, the Teacher, was leaving them, Jesus promised his

⁴ 2 Peter 1:20-21 NASB

disciples that the Father would send the Holy Spirit to teach, to guide, and to speak bearing witness of him.⁵ The apostle John testifies to this provision writing to his children in the faith that “the anointing” teaches about all things, and Paul assures believers in Corinth that the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge are given through the Spirit.⁶ Storytellers should be taught about the Holy Spirit and his involvement so they will recognize that he is to be the teacher.

The apostles and the early church fathers made use of a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament called the Septuagint. By virtue of being a translation it did not fully reflect every nuance of the original language but it provided sound biblical foundations for the amazing growth of the early church. Many languages now have the scriptures; translations with the same inherent limitations and the same incredible potential to make God’s word known. For God’s purpose the Bible has been preserved to this day and his word made accessible to many from diverse cultures around the world in their heart language, but many others do not have the biblical story in their own language.⁷ For millions who have no Scripture in their language, Bible stories translated by storytellers are a means to build the church in their language group. To bring this about literate missionaries, particularly Bible translators must be involved in the preparation of selected stories and in teaching storying. As with the written translations the soundness of oral translation depends on the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit works with the intelligence of storytellers through the knowledge of their own language and culture as he did with those who penned the Scriptures. The Spirit works in the listeners teaching, guiding, and witnessing as he has done since the Father sent him to the

⁵ John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-15

⁶ 1 John 2:27, I Corinthians 12:8

⁷ The New Testament is now available in 1,185 languages, but only 451 have the complete Bible. Two hundred million people have no scriptures in their language (www.wycliffe.net).

first church. Involving the church community is another key factor in proper understanding and application of the word of God.

The Local Church as an Interpretive Community

Those who train oral learners should take into account the importance of involving the local church as an interpretive community. When a single leader in the church is the sole teacher and interpreter of God's word the local church runs the risk of being misled because of the individual's biases and limited perspective. The Western emphasis on the individual and higher education contributes to elitism and an exclusion of the larger community from contributing to biblical interpretation. Storying offers an alternative way of teaching that is accessible to everyone in the church and that equips the community to participate in teaching and in biblically informed church leadership.

Reflection on social behavior patterns in New Testament times illustrates the importance of community both in the biblical cultures and in oral cultures today. In the group orientation of the first-century Mediterranean world behavior is influenced by the demands and expectations of the group who can grant or withhold recognition (Malina 1993:67). This was Jesus' culture and his methods are recommended for use in oral cultures due to a similar group orientation. Jesus effectively employed dialogue, particularly to engage the religious leaders, and his parables and questions drew his listeners into interaction with his teaching. He prepared his disciples within their own cultural context. The group orientation reflected in Jesus' ministry and many biblical stories provides instruction for the local church to function as a responsible community exercising a culturally appropriate influence. Western missionaries have at times successfully incorporated the community as a integral part of the development of Christian leaders.

Dutch missionary-theologian Hans-Ruedi Weber was an innovator in the use of story for biblical instruction. In 1952 Weber began developing a methodology to teach the rudiments of the Christian faith to 30,000 nominal Christians living on the Luwak peninsula in Central Celebes, Indonesia. Because Weber was willing to change from his highly literate teaching methods, the members of the local church came to integrate God's word into their lives. Convinced of the importance of the Bible in the life of the Christian *and* the congregation, Weber employed storytelling with dialogue that involved the whole church. Weber observed that "the classification and integrating character of so-called 'primitive thinking' can be seen as a great gift." He insisted "that though he was the teacher, he became a pupil in order to communicate with the people" and as a result the Luwak-Banggai church community together discovered the Bible as the story by which God reveals himself (Hesselgrave 1994:96-99).

Those who would train oral learners for leadership in the church can take a lesson from Weber's practices and Jesus' example. A healthy church calls for not just a few but for many qualified leaders and a key qualification is Christian character. Jesus told stories and used questions, but he also developed character in his disciples by his example and by sharing life together in community. Michael J. Wilkins, in *Following the Master*, points out that Jesus developed character in his disciples using the norms and values of his culture (1992:74-79). Christian character is best developed within the culture and community in which the leader will serve. Instruction in character is found in the biblical stories, the same stories that present the unfolding redemptive purpose of God. Dialogue about character based on these stories suits the group orientation of the oral culture and prepares the local church community for its role to influence and evaluate character.

The knowledge of God and of Christian character are foundational for the local church, but a full understanding of the plan of God should challenge oral learners that the reach of story does not end with their community. Whether one's learning preference is literate or oral, "attention to and interaction with the word of God should lead us to both a realization and an explanation of God's great plan to include representatives of the various peoples of the world in his eternal family—and to his desire to use us in the fulfillment of that plan!" (Hesselgrave 1994:66). Making God's story widely known within the local church must challenge oral learners to move beyond their own culture and to discover the effectiveness of story as a means of contextualization in witness to others different from themselves.

The Role of Storying in Contextualization

Contextualization can be simply defined as what occurs when the biblical message is communicated by a messenger from one culture in a way that is meaningful to those receiving the message in their respective cultural context. David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, while colleagues in the School of World Mission at Trinity, coauthored a book with the thesis that contextualization is a necessity for world evangelization in that it provides an understandable hearing of the gospel that is true to the Bible message and related to the culture of the respondents. "Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing; Bible translation, interpretation, and application; incarnational lifestyle; evangelism; Christian instruction; church planting and growth; church organization; worship style—indeed with all those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission" (Hesselgrave/Rommen 1989:200). The use of story is a means of contextualization that relates to every activity mentioned in this list, and specifically incorporates Bible translation, interpretation, and

application. Story is effective for evangelism and doctrinal instruction, as well as in establishing and building healthy churches.

Paul Hiebert insists that contextualization is something that ultimately must be done in and by the church. He identifies four commitments as the basis for the a “critical contextualization”: commitment to the Bible as fully authoritative and the rule for faith and practice; to the operation of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers who are open to his leading; to the church as an interdependent, interpretive community which includes the historical church; and finally to theological discussion among theologians of various cultures (Hesselgrave 1994:80-81). Through storying churches composed of oral learners are led to make these commitments and are trained to fulfill them. Hesselgrave, in fleshing out Hiebert’s commitments states, “Missionaries and local pastors may be best equipped to instruct church members concerning basic principles of biblical interpretation. But local pastors and especially, ordinary believers will be best equipped to provide information concerning the significance of local words, beliefs and practices” adding that “the Bible itself is the primary instrument of contextualization” (Hesselgrave 1994:80-81). The Bible is a model of God’s contextualization and its stories provide the missionary and the believing community common ground for the collaborative work of contextualization the Bible's message for a particular people group.

Missionaries should understand the relationship of theology and contextualization in order to guide oral learners to employ story without straying from the truth. The writings of theologians provide insight for today’s missionary practitioner. J.J. Davis, editor of *The Necessity of Systematic Theology*, distinguishes between doctrine and theology by defining doctrine as a “straightforward summary of biblical teaching” and theology as a “secondary reflection on the content of biblical doctrine. He acknowledges the objection posed by some that

a contextualized message is open to syncretism, a blending of traditional beliefs with the gospel that dilutes the essential truths of the biblical revelation. Davis' responds that, based on the Bible, the church as the believing community has in the past successfully distinguished between creative contextualization of the faith and heretical distortions of it (Davis 1978:181). In oral cultures stories correspond to Davis' "doctrine" and the interpretive process of storying using questions corresponds to Davis' ideal of a theology integrated with missions, a theology open to creative contextualization. His challenge to seminary teachers has application as well to those who train oral learners: "Risk greater trust in the ability of the Holy Spirit to filter the content of biblical revelation through the life experiences of our students and to produce fresh articulations of the faith" (Davis 1978:182). Davis suggests that theology "rightly functions only within the context of the ongoing mission of the church" and that missions are inherently theological. If storying is to communicate a message that transforms it must allow for a "critical contextualization" that births an integrated theology.

The Goal Is Transformed Lives

Oral learners and those who train them must ultimately be changed by the stories to be qualified to tell them. The rapid spread of the gospel among oral learners through the use of story could be attributed to the ease with which oral learners share stories with others. But a more significant reason the gospel story is passed from one to the next is that it gives life. "One aspect of the uniqueness of scripture is that it is personal communication from the Son of God" (Hesselgrave 2005:267). When Christ is personally known through a story he moves people to tell others the story. The focus of those who train storytellers ought to be on leading them to experience the life changing work of the story for themselves. The missionary likewise needs to have the story work its transformation in his life.

The following account illustrates how a missionary learned theology from one of those he came to teach:

I can sympathize with and feel with young Americans, who are going through the agony of unbelief. I used to think that faith was kind of a head trip, a kind of intellectual assent to the truths and doctrines of our religion. I know better now. When my faith began to be shattered, I did not hurt in my head. I hurt all over.

Months later when all this had passed, I was sitting talking with a Masai elder about the agony of belief and unbelief. He used two languages to respond to me—his own and Kiswahili. He pointed out that the word my Masai catechist, Paul, and I had used to convey *faith* was not a very satisfactory word in their language. It meant literally “to agree to”. I, myself, knew that the word had that shortcoming. He said “to believe” like that was similar to a white hunter shooting an animal with his gun from a great distance. Only his eyes and his fingers took part in the act. We should find another word. He said for a man really to believe is like a lion going after his prey. His nose and eyes and ears pick up the prey. His legs give him the speed to catch it. All the power of his body is involved in the terrible death leap and the single blow that actually kills. And as the animal goes down the lion envelops it in its arms (Africans refer to the front legs of an animal as its arms) pulls it to himself, and makes it part of himself. This is the way a lion kills. This is the way a man believes. This is what faith is.

I looked at the elder in silence and amazement. Faith understood like that would explain why, when my own was gone, I ached in every fiber of my being. But my wise old teacher was not finished yet.

“We did not search you out, Padri,” he said to me. “We did not even want you to come to us. You searched us out. You followed us away from your house into the bush, into the plains, into the steppes where our cattle are, into the hills where we take our cattle for water, into our villages, into our homes. You told us of the High God, how we must search for him, even leave our land and our people to find him. But we have not done this. We have not left our land. We have not searched for him. He has searched for us. He has searched *us* out and found us. All the time we think we are the lion. In the end, the lion is God” (Donovan 1982: 62-63, italics his).

Vincent Donovan left his home and took God’s story to the Masai where they live. He spoke to them in community and many came to faith. But when Donovan, in his own crisis of faith, was instructed by the faith by one of those Masai leaders he too was changed. He gained an appreciation for the depth of theology to be found in an oral culture and God’s fuller purpose for missions was realized. As more missionaries discover the capacity of story to reveal God and transform lives, including their own, a basis will be established for the kind of collaboration that will see oral learners taking the lead in discipling the nations. Storying is a means of transmitting both the message of God’s word and its living nature.

Conclusion

The biblical narrative contains the revelation of God on which storying is based. Story is a means God has used and continues to use in making himself known, one that is particularly suited to those who have a preference for oral learning. Emphasis on propositional learning in formal Western education has left many missionaries ill-equipped to train oral learners to be effective communicators in their own cultures. Storying is proposed as an alternative method that can be learned and modeled by missionaries in the evangelization and discipleship of oral learners.

The biblical story is a primary source of theology, early church history, and missionary praxis. In story format the word of God is effective to equip and move the church to disciple the nations. The historic Christian foundations for the Great Commission may be taught using story. These include the veracity of the Bible, the need for the laymen to be theologians, and sound Bible interpretation in reliance on the Holy Spirit. Those who would enlist oral learners must teach the biblical stories to equip the community of the faith and its leaders, contextualize God's message and convey a transforming message. Storying is a method that oral learners can employ to reach their own people and those of other cultures with the gospel.

The participation of oral learners in world evangelization is essential. But so is the role of Western missionaries. For the world's four billion oral learners it is not a written but an oral expression that will commend the message of life to their understanding. God's story will be most effectively proclaimed by oral learners, and scholarly literate studies will furnish fundamental support. The narratives found in the word of God are common ground, the place to learn reciprocal respect and cooperation.

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