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[My Bumpy Road to Orality](#)

Requested article for the Lausanne 2010 Forum

[Paradigm Shift](#)

by Pastor Miles DeBenedictis

Last week I, and two of our assistant pastors, attended a seminar on “storytelling” the Bible. For 5 days we considered both the process and the purpose of such an approach.

The interest in such a course is the result of much reading and a growing conviction (especially as a result of the Perspectives on the World Christian Movement course) that, because of high rates of illiteracy, the unreached and unengaged of the world require alternate methods, or means whereby they can discover and harness the truths of Scripture.

In the process of walking this path, I’ve discovered several things that are potentially paradigm shifting.

Stepping Out-Of-The-Box is Difficult

While not a groundbreaking statement, it does need to be recognized that we have a certain Christian culture that we prefer, and like any cross-cultural experience, this brought a significant level of culture-shock. Within the western evangelical church, we value inductive, expositional Bible study; especially in our Calvary Chapel stream. We’re most comfortable with an open Bible, a pen and a notebook or journal.

When the leader of this seminar required that we close our Bibles and put our pens and papers away, I knew I wasn’t at a Calvary event. During our hour+ drive home each of the first three days we found ourselves talking much of our [initial] dislike for this process.

Westerners Can Benefit Too

It’s a striking statistic, 87% of Americans are preferred oral learners. While only 14% are illiterate (which is higher than many might imagine), it’s the smallest segment of our society (13%) that are highly-literate. This means that a very small demographic of Americans are able to engage in any meaningful self-study of the Bible.

I know, it's difficult for us to believe this, but because most of our church services are geared toward the highly-literate, we have a much larger demographic of the 13% represented on the typical Sunday morning. Is it possible that we're neglecting a large segment of our society?

Western culture places high value on literacy. In many ways it is considered the key to success. This is certainly seen in the money that developed nations give toward literacy programs, like that which UNESCO has focused on for decades.

All such things are definitely good, but the fact remains "The illiterate you will have with you always." I'm not advocating for any removal of literacy training, but I am thankful that God inspired Paul to write, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God."

For the last several years our church has partnered with a ministry that records and distributes audio scriptures for people-groups in highly illiterate nations. They have an ambitious goal of bringing the Word of God in recorded form to the 30 nations of the world with 50% or higher illiteracy rates.

As one called to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, I have found myself wondering, "How do we disciple those that are receiving our audio Bibles?" Discipleship is key; Jesus commissioned us to make disciples and apart from it many groups will fall into syncretism. I'm more and more convinced that the answer to my above question is a narrative discipleship method. The reality is, this is not exclusive to third-world developing nations.

While I think that our methods for discipleship are good and should not be discarded, another tool in the toolbox is certainly beneficial. As I mentioned several weeks ago in a previous article, our success as equippers should not only be based on having good Bible students. In considering this [oral] method and the fruit of it, I think it has great potential for enabling our congregation to discover and digest significant Biblical truth in a way that they can retain and apply it.

Narrative Bible Discovery is Not Emergent

Now I know, "Narrative Theology" and "Bible Storying" are code for Emergent. Be that as it may, Doug Pagitt and Brian McLaren will not be guest bloggers on CrossConnection any time soon.

Perhaps the most enlightening revelation in all of last week's course was the recognition that, when done correctly this method is actually more textually correct than not. While it may be hard to believe, I was struck by the biblical accuracy that was maintained in simply telling, retelling and examining the stories for the observations and applications that are found in them.

Anytime that someone—in this very interactive, dialogic process—brought forth something that was even the slightest bit "off," the moderator (i.e. storyteller) would simply say, "Can we find that in the story?" Immediately the group was brought back to the word and it was easily sorted out.

The process was "very" different than what I, as a pastor/teacher, am generally used to. But, as

the week went on it became a joy to see God, by His Spirit, direct the discussion and bring forth truths that I did not initially see, although they were right on the surface.

While I'm not completely sure just how we will incorporate this into the life of our church, I do know that it will be utilized in some fashion as we move forward.

Further consideration:

[The God's Story Project](#)
[National Assessment of Adult Literacy](#)

[Theology on the Move: Storying and the Fulfilment of the Great Commission](#)

World Christian Foundations-Module 2B Research Paper
Jeffrey L. Nelson

[Hitting Our Heads Against a Wall](#)

[This letter came to STS headquarters from a mission director working in a closed country. Actually, it is a letter he sent to a mission leader working in yet another closed country.]

"Dear XXX,

It's incredible that you would write me regarding Oral Bible Teaching (OBT). I was just about to write you, to give you this information.

When I first heard of this, I was not at all interested. I reasoned that we can't build a strong church - rooted in the scriptures - from telling children's Bible Stories. But when I was in the States at a mission's conference, I stayed with a couple that teaches OBT skills all over the world. I peppered them with all kinds of questions, and even left the conference for a few hours to travel with them so I could video a training session they were giving that weekend.

XXX, you know my commitment that the church, as well as individual believers, be grounded in the Word of God. One cannot merely be familiar with scripture truths, he/she has to inductively exegete God's word, and correctly divide the Word of Truth. Anything less than this is opening the believers to syncretism, and a whole host of problems. My absolute commitment to inductive study and responsible exegesis has only increased over the years. It has not waned with the idea of Oral Bible Teaching, it has only increased.

I was struck with the possibilities of doing inductive, exegetical study in an oral fashion. Could it be possible? And, why would it be necessary?

First, why is it necessary? All the people who teach Oral Bible Skills have their CDs and their video clips of testimonies that do a far better job of explaining the necessity of Oral Bible Teaching than can I. A major turning point came, I think, with a report at the 2004 Luusanne Committee for World Evangelism meetings, that documented the overwhelming percentage of people in the world that are oral learners- even in highly "literate" societies, like the U.K. or the U.S. This is even more acute in places where people are not highly literate. [*Making Disciples of Oral Learners*]

For 17 years we have been working here. We have taken a very oral approach to evangelism - we use no literature at all – our teammates learn, memorize and give a oral gospel presentation. As a result, we have seen phenomenal results; many, many people have put their faith in Christ. When we do follow up, however, we immediately switch to a very literate approach. We provide believers with a Bible, and meet with them to read, study and learn how to inductively study the scriptures. With this follow up approach, we have been hitting our heads against a wall. New believers have languished. They've not grown in their faith, grown cold, and backslidden.

In one village we entered about 20 people made genuine commitments to Christ. We emphasized reading the scriptures, showing them how to inductively read it for themselves, as well as spending personal time with them, sharing our lives. Today, none of them are what you'd call "following hard after Christ." Many of them wanted to, but after all this time it's like they never really took in God's word. It didn't sink in. I don't think the reading and studies ever got through to them at all.

What's more... they never took the scriptures and shared it with others. My goodness XXX, how in the world will we ever reach the millions of unreached if those we minister to do not minister to others?

Teaching the Bible orally has, I believe, fundamental advantages. First, many people absorb Bible truths in a way that they wouldn't when we try to get them to read it. Secondly, people are much more likely to share these truths with others-- this is the ultimate "reproducible ministry." Another advantage for closed areas of the world is that people are not as likely to get in trouble with the authorities. I could go on, but those CDs and video clips put together to show the strategic nature of this approach.

The second question is the most important to me, "Is it possible to teach the word inductively and exegetically in an oral fashion?"

Many mission organizations have some kind of division that promotes and teaches oral Bible learning. Most of them are members of the ION, *International Orality Network*. And there are few organizations that specifically specialize in Oral Bible Teaching. I found one that I really liked, called *Simpl*
y the Story (STS), in that they actually teach inductively in oral form. They are as close to exegetical, oral Bible study as you can get. I knew I found what I was looking for and I called them up (Skype is a wonderful tool), and started talking with them.

Last Fall we had two instructors come from *Simply the Story* (STS), and they led a training sessions for five days. The first two days were for trainers (people we selected from our team) and then the next three days those who had just been trained, trained the rest of our team with the help of the STS instructors. This has given us tremendous momentum in the mission as we've now started to incorporate this method in our mission work. (You remember all you learned about adult learning styles and how to teach? In the conference they really did this well. It did not feel like a five day workshop.)

We started using this immediately, and I am really pleased with the reports of how it has been going. This does not mean that we've stopped teaching inductive, exegetical studies of the written word. Ha! Far from it; this is still crucial. But what we are doing orally 1) fits well with our studies in the written word, it does not replace them, 2) reaches many people who can't, or don't read, 3) is something that the rank and file people can do well, (we are mobilizing the laity), 4) is able to be shared far easier with others beyond those whom we minister directly to, ie. it spreads, 5) is perhaps the safest way the word can be prolific in a closed country, 6) is not dependant on any outside funds, devices or other resources! It is the most reproducible mission's strategy around.

Again, as I said, *Simply the Story* (STS) really emphasizes telling the Bible accurately-- taking a single passage of scripture and verbalizing it in way that is not an off-the-wall paraphrase-- so that what you are sharing really is the Word, the oral Word, in the same way we read the written Word.

"The written Word of God is the Canon, it is the source. We must teach it and how to accurately interpret it. But, from the written Word we get the oral Word. When we teach the Bible orally, we have the Bible open to show that it is from the Bible, the written Word. So, we show people that scripture is the source.

In the early church, men read from the scriptures and people listened. When Paul sent his letters, he asked that it be read aloud. I was struck with a question in one of the CDs I picked up: "What percentage of people in the first century could read or write – at a time when "3000 were added unto their number" in a single day? The answer, I was told, was about 5%.

Biblical accuracy is one reason I liked "*Simply the Story*" (STS). But the other is that they also teach people how to learn inductively. After the story is given, they ask people inductive questions about what they just heard. They get the people to verbalize observations, they ask questions to help them form accurate interpretations, and they get them to see for themselves how it applies in their own lives.

This really is a tremendous tool, well developed, and skillfully taught.

You know that I am now working to target all the unreached peoples in our area. I want to ask your help in implementing STS to reach the special people you are working with. XXXX

Besides the articles above, more testimonies from trained theologians who treasure God's Word

are seen in [Uses & Users-Academic](#) and [Uses & Users-Churches and Pastors](#) .

For specifics on how *Simply The Story* treats Scripture see [Design of STS](#)