

# The Oral Story Bible: A Breakthrough Strategy in Rapid Engagement Among Unreached People Groups

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Date: 20.08.2010

Category: Orality

Editor's Note: This Cape Town 2010 Advance Paper has been written by Ron Green as an overview of the topic to be discussed at the Multiplex session on "Crafting an Oral Bible Story." Responses to this paper through the Lausanne Global Conversation will be fed back to the author and others to help shape their final presentations at the Congress.

## Introduction

We stand at a unique moment in history! We can look back at the progress of the Gospel and see that the Lord has blessed. At the same time, we're burdened and challenged by the enormous task facing the global Church today. We're reminded of the task that remains among thousands of Unreached People Groups speaking languages with no translated Scripture. Almost half the world lives with a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim faith. And, everywhere there is a need for deeper discipleship. Recognition of these critical needs compels us to focus our prayer and ministry as never before. The Great Commission can seem overwhelming. But the Church is beginning to work together and new creative strategies are opening some of the greatest opportunities in history.

The purpose of this paper is to draw our attention to one very measurable need. Throughout history, literacy was a protected privilege reserved solely for the elite; usually the leaders of government, commerce, military and religion. For several millennia, leaders often counted on this privilege to control the masses whom they ruled. We cherish our education and literacy—and we should, after all of the effort invested. However, we're reminded that the majority of the unreached people of our world are primarily oral learners who learn much differently from those who are literate. This is a critical moment to review all of our methods and strategies of ministry so that we're prepared to face this challenge with creativity and God's heart of compassion for the lost.

## The Remaining Task

Two thousand years ago Jesus entrusted His followers with a special commission, a mandate to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. We are told repeatedly throughout Scripture of God's heart for every language, tribe and people group to hear the Good News. We are commanded to go and tell everyone the Gospel and disciple those who choose to follow Christ.

There is much discussion regarding the depth of our Gospel presentations and our discipleship activities. But the breadth seems clearly measurable—every people group, tribe and language should have the Gospel message. Yet in the 21st century there are still many groups where the Gospel has not penetrated. Research reveals that there are still thousands of unreached people groups with nearly half of them not yet engaged by evangelism and church planting efforts.

Today, nearly one-third of the earth's languages still await the first verse of Scripture in their own language. Hundreds of languages have just a few chapters available to them. Without translated Scripture, we are unlikely to find any Gospel message present. Often, there are no believers and no indigenous multiplying churches; because how do we evangelize and disciple without God's Word? It seems there should be a minimal level of effort in every language, tribe, and people group. Perhaps giving them access to God's Word in their own language and in their own learning style could be the first step of taking the Gospel to every people group.

## A Challenge for the Global Church

A question often arises regarding the first steps of work among an unreached people group. The initial stage of engaging an unreached people group begins with providing the first Scripture in their language. Many of our organizations partner closely with Bible translation agencies. Those involved in such partnerships might agree that linguists and Bible translators are uniquely called and gifted to understand and engineer language. All of us who have a Bible today owe a great debt of gratitude to translators who sacrificed greatly to bring us access to God's Word. Because of their vision and sacrifice, the translation of Scripture has accelerated at an unprecedented pace in recent decades. Despite such acceleration, we're reminded that most of the remaining languages are unwritten languages that present incredible and continuing challenges.

In a world of specialization, it's easy for us to look to those who are called to be translators to own that task for the whole world. However, if we believe that Scripture access could be an important step in world evangelization, could this be a burden that all believers should carry together? Our desire would be to encourage, honor, pray for, resource and join hands with those gifted servants who are already engaged in Scripture translation. Research shows us that there are 2,252 language groups with a population of 350 million people who have no Scripture in their language. There are hundreds more languages with just a few chapters of Scripture. There are millions who presently have no access to Old Testament passages that can be essential to building bridges of understanding about Jesus, especially among Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims.

### The Dream for EVERY?

If more of us "owned" the task of Scripture access and worked together toward a break-through, what could happen? Could this be the first generation in history to ensure that at least some of God's Word is available to every people group on the planet? How can the Great Commission be completed if we have failed even to begin the work in thousands of languages and people groups? Could we commit ourselves afresh to starting the Great Commission effort in every group? With that dream and vision, a number of ministries began working together to see what could happen in our generation. We began with some core beliefs:

#### A. All people groups need access to the Gospel

A core value that pervades all other values is that of reaching all peoples. This means that the proclamation of God's Word will not be limited by the size of a people group, the level of literacy, or the geographic or political context.

#### B. God's Word in their mother tongue is always best in order to penetrate the heart

The first language we hear in our mother's arms is usually our mother tongue (or heart language). Making Scripture available in the heart languages of unreached people groups facilitates the growth of viable, reproducing and indigenously led churches. We desire for the gospel message found in God's Word to flow freely at the heart level of every individual, with everyone having the opportunity to receive, understand, respond and reproduce the Gospel within their own culture.

#### C. Cultural learning style should be honored (including stories, music, drama and art)

We attempt to honor the communication style, learning preference and oral traditions of each distinct people group. With thousands of languages yet unwritten, learning how these cultures have retained and passed along their culture, language, history, music, poetry and values for thousands of years is critical. These "heart issues" are always packaged in a heart learning style (usually oral and highly cultural). God's Word is full of stories that reveal to us His character, His plan of redemption and His loving relationship with man. The Bible preserves these stories in a written record, but many of them were originally communicated orally; as was the primary means of communicating them over the millennia.

#### D. Strategic partnering is essential with a task this enormous

An effective cross-cultural partnership model will bear witness to God's grace to the world and will bring glory to God. We are committed to partnering with local churches and to encouraging and facilitating their success in being on mission with God and working together to fulfill the Great Commission. We also believe in close partnership with national teams, national churches or local agencies for building sustainable models. Sometimes the most fruitful model is a partnership with humanitarian groups to develop a more holistic ministry impact.

#### E. National storying movements should be sought

The result of this movement is the planting and growing of healthy house churches that respond to the unique, God-given culture of each people group while staying firmly grounded in God's Word. Church planting becomes a spiritual movement as members of each local church plant new churches within their own people group and beyond. As God's Word flows freely, we believe changed lives will result and God's stories will multiply into other nearby people groups, resulting in a local storying movement.

#### F. Oral Scripture is an initial impact, not the final goal

While providing oral stories from Scripture, it's also important to note that we work in partnership with Bible translators to protect the integrity of Scripture at every stage of each project. We value the finished and recorded stories as important foundation blocks to providing additional scripture resources within each people group.

As often as possible, our goal is to see both oral Scripture and printed Scripture available to every group. The basis of this is Deuteronomy 31 and 32 where God tells Moses at the end of his life that he should write down God's promises and laws and place them in the Ark of the Covenant to be read every seven years. Then God told Moses to teach the people God's Word through song so that His Word would be on the lips and ears of all the people. God even gave Moses and Joshua the song to teach His people.

#### A Breakthrough Strategy

In partnership with Bible translators and church planters, we searched for a way to provide oral Scripture in a culturally appropriate way among unreached and unengaged people groups where no Gospel message existed. This new strategy calls for pioneering teams of two or three people (often national teams or from nearby cultures) to engage an unreached group. Within two to three years, they are able to develop a set of Bible stories that span the Scriptures from Creation to the life of Christ, and then to the establishments of the early house churches in Acts.

The training is usually spread over a two-year period so that these "rapid response teams" can be coached and mentored throughout their ministry project. During a two-year period, the teams are brought together every four to six months for several weeks of training. The trainers provide a step-by-step process to: Find a "person of peace" Immerse themselves in the culture Study the local belief system (worldview) Locate a language helper and story-teller Gather listening groups (story groups) to hear the stories and interact together

As the teams go deeper, they begin to tell Old Testament stories from Creation to the fall of man to Abraham, David, Elijah, and Isaiah. Soon, the teams learn to weave a theme of redemption from Creation to Jesus. The training helps the teams with word choices and basic translation issues. Over time, they are coached to develop a set of twenty or more stories ranging from Creation to Christ to the establishment of early house churches in Acts.

Once the story set is developed, some of the stories are recorded so a story consultant can check for comprehension and biblical accuracy. After necessary changes have been made, the entire story set is recorded as an "oral text" of Scripture. These recordings protect the stories until written Scripture

can be provided. Audio recordings can also involve drama, music and other cultural methodologies. They can be broadly distributed as it fits the church planting strategy.

## The Process

New recruits are taught to craft the biblical stories so they are easily told orally. A local storyteller is recruited to help connect with the target language group. Small story groups are formed. Audio recordings of the stories are checked by an outside consultant to test for accuracy and comprehension so the stories can serve as an "oral text." After approval, the audio recordings are shared in homes and small groups, and even broadcast by digital players for broad sowing (radio in some locations).

Story sets contain 20 or more Bible stories from Creation to Christ's return (Old Testament, the Gospels and Acts).

Desired Outcomes  
A first generation of storytellers sharing the stories in the local language  
Small story groups formed  
Audio recordings of the stories that are consultant checked as an "oral text"  
Digital players for broad sowing (radio in some locations)  
Story sets with Bible stories from Creation to Christ's return (Old Testament, Gospels and Acts).  
New believers  
House churches and multiplication

## Field Testimonies

"When western missionaries came to our country 100 years ago to share the gospel, they shared it in the same way they probably had learned it. Had they stopped to ask our local people how to share the most important message of all time, they would have learned that all of our most treasured information (history, culture, heritage, values, beliefs, and even law) is contained in stories and songs. Normally, it was government propaganda that was in printed form, so, unfortunately, the Bible was viewed as foreign propaganda.

"As I sat in this story training, I thought, "Finally, this is the way that the gospel should have always been shared in my country." This is God's Word in its purest form, spoken or sung naturally and in the local language. Why not share the most treasured story of all time in a way that multiplies so quickly!! It takes people seven or eight years here with multiple methods to lead them to Christ, but with Bible stories, we're seeing decisions and discipleship within the first two years! So simple, but so very effective?" National leader in a secure Middle East country

"After sitting in a week of story training, I woke up early this morning from a disturbing dream that gripped my heart. In the dream, I was standing in the midst of fruit trees that were laden with ripe fruit, so ripe that it was falling from the trees right into our baskets. We were so excited with the harvest until I looked at my basket and saw all the fruit falling through and rotting on the ground. God spoke to my heart and said that our baskets are broken and He added that He had revealed to me this week how to get them mended and fixed.

"For years, we've blamed our poor discipleship on the people"; that they just don't care enough to truly follow Jesus. What if we were wrong? What if we weren't communicating to their heart and in a way that they can learn and reproduce it? We can't afford to lose God's Harvest! Please come back and help us fix our baskets by giving them God's Word in the way that Africans learn best"; by stories!!" George ? A West African Mission leader

"My husband and I are trainers for our organization here in East Asia. Besides that, we are also involved directly in working among an unreached people group. During the past couple of years, we've tried all the strategies that we knew to reach this group, but the task is nearly impossible with no Scripture, no JESUS Film, and no believers in this language. We attended the training with little confidence that this would work, but we were desperate for a breakthrough. After the initial training, we returned to our unreached group and began using this Bible story strategy. We formed a small

group and started developing our first stories with them. Can you imagine my surprise when we saw 15 people come to Christ? These were our very first converts. This happened during our first few months using this strategy. We're now seeing the power of God's Word shared in a cultural way in the local language and the outcome is incredible.? Yun - East Asia

### Final Thoughts

In just the last six years, partner ministries have worked together and seen over 200 unreached people groups in more than 40 countries hear God's Word in their own language and cultural learning style. Hundreds of small story groups have started and thousands of new believers are following Christ because they now have access to His Word (in their own language & cultural learning style)!

We dream of the day when every language, tribe, and people group will have access to the Gospel and we dream of it happening in our generation! Could we dream and plan and pray and work together so that every language hears in this decade? Until then, they're still waiting?350 million people waiting for us to begin the Great Commission where they live. We think they've waited long enough!

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