

Storytelling the Gospel-The Way Forward

By Jim Bowman and SD Ponraj 4-15-08

The Ancient Path

For the past 200 years, the Western Church and foreign missions strategies, including Christian educational learning methods and materials, have focused largely on using literate means to reach the unreached of traditional oral cultures. The subject of orality-that is oral communication and narrative expressions of the written Scriptures have received little attention. There is an obvious dissonance to this reality that gives us pause and reason to rethink the future and perhaps rediscover the ancient path of long ago.

We all know that Jesus was a storyteller, yet the church has largely ignored or forgotten his communication policies. The belief in the superiority of the written page has been deeply engrained into the Western mind. Many of our modern missionary methods were developed during the nineteenth century. Our early missionaries brought many helpful elements of Western civilization to touch the lives of the unreached. Modernity became the garment of the Gospel message. We introduced modern educational methods, built hospitals and sent doctors to the uttermost parts of the world. It was believed by everyone that given a few years, the entire world would come to see the superiority of Western civilization and therefore the superiority of Christ. Time has passed and while progress has been made, a large portion of the world is still longing for authentic expressions of truth, and social justice that only Jesus can bring. Two-thirds of the world is still waiting to respond to the revolutionary message of Jesus. How do we embark on a future of effective communication of his message?

Defining Orality

Today, over 4 billion people are primarily oral learners. The vast majority of them are unreached peoples who still pass down important information and values through oral tradition. While it is true that some oral cultures have come to understand the power of the written page, storytelling, music, poetry, and drama continue to light up their eyes and bring meaning to their lives. Among traditional oral cultures, storytelling forms the very basis of their understanding of truth. Even here in the West, during the past 75 years Hollywood has effectively used stories to redefine our worldview. Storytellers on the silver screen have reshaped our nation's biblical values into increasingly more humanistic and materialistic worldviews. So we see that even among literate based cultures, knowledge and values are passed down in story form to the next generation. The stories we tell shape our worldview, define us as a people, unveil our deepest needs, relive the events of our past, and profile the concerns that shape our future.

A Case Study from India

Let me illustrate my point here by telling a short story as shared by Lal Bihari Mukhiya a grass roots church planter working in Patna, Bihar State, North India.

"I want to tell you my experience as I come from a village culture in India. I was born in a village and I lived my life in a village. We have our own way of how people talk, sit and stand. I want to tell you about my village culture. Most of the people in the villages are part of Indian oral culture. Most of the people are non-literate. They have never been to school. They have never read any books. Village people take interest in stories, music and drama. In the village in the evening time people meet on the street corner after dinner. They meet, tell stories and sing village songs. They learn lessons from these stories and they apply them to their lives. The old people in the village recite the Ramayan and Mahabharata (Hindu books) and they tell them without stopping. They

have never read a book, they have never have been to school but still they tell the stories. People listen from others and they learn. They are not literate but they hear from their fore fathers and learn.

In my childhood I also **used to** join this group and I **used to** listen to many stories. I was very much interested in listening to stories and I used to memorize those stories. I come from a Hindu family. When I was in sixth standard in the school I had a chance to hear the story of Jesus. Then I read the story of Jesus in the book but I was not able to understand it. Later, someone told me that Christ is God, and he gives forgiveness from sin. I came to understand that Jesus is the true God. I accepted Jesus and began to follow him. Jesus began to talk to me that there are many people who do not know the true God...who will go and tell them?

I committed my life to the Lord and was baptized. I began to tell people about the story of Jesus which I heard in my childhood. After some time I got an opportunity to study in the Bible college and learn the Word of God. There I was taught in the Western style of education. When I came back from the college I used the same Western methods to preach the gospel but nobody accepted Christ. I became very discouraged and I was thinking I would leave the ministry. Then I got the opportunity to attend a training seminar in Madhupur that was organized by Uncle SD Ponraj and Auntie Sheila to learn how to plant churches among the illiterate people by storytelling the gospel through Communication Bridges. I was greatly influenced by the training. I returned to my mission field and used those same methods. Storytelling changed my ministry. So many people believed on Jesus Christ and were baptized. Now, in partnership with other missions in Bihar the training is ongoing. In every month **800 to 1000** people are taking baptism and **60 to 80 house** churches planted. Now we are seeing a large movement with many thousands of people who are receiving Jesus Christ and taking baptism”.

During the past 10 years, thousands of non-Western grass roots church planters have received training to use the Oral Bible to communicate the gospel more effectively. In the state of Bihar, more than 15 people group movements have started coming to Christ as a result of storytelling.

The Bihar Outreach Network

In 1996 I first met my friend and colleague Dr. SD Ponraj who began with a dream to transform the state of Bihar from the “graveyard of missions” to a “vineyard of missions” of the Lord Jesus Christ. His dream was to imitate the methods of the Apostle Paul by using sound Biblical principles. He is founder and General Secretary of the Bihar Out Reach Network (BORN), a partnership of 70 indigenous ministries and 20 western churches and agencies that are cooperating together to transform the lives of over 90 million people who live in the state of Bihar, India.

A brief look at the history of BORN helps us to appreciate all that God has done from those early days when SD Ponraj and his wife Sheila left more comfortable surroundings to answer a call of God. They began the difficult task of moving their family to Bihar, a place where few others were willing to go. Past mission efforts of the last 100 years had not yielded much results. However, God had given a promise to Ponraj and Sheila from Ezek 37:4, 5, 10 & 11 that he would “breathe” on the dry bones of the state of Bihar. “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live”. Today that promise is being fulfilled. God is pouring out His Spirit on Bihar in a way that is without precedent.

In 1998 my wife Carla and I traveled to Bihar at the invitation of SD Ponraj to give a seminar on storytelling the Gospel. We called it *Communication Bridges to Oral Cultures*. This is a 3-day intensive course is designed to help grass

roots church planters to master the basic skills of planting churches through a systematic approach of telling stories from the Bible. Carla and I developed this training based on our experiences as missionaries in Latin America. In Jan of 1998 we trained the first 120 evangelists and pastors in the art of storytelling, drama, music and poetry of the Bible. There was an immediate and enthusiastic response from all of the participants.

As time went by, the results were slow at first, but Ponraj and the BORN team remained committed to a long-term approach of a consistent and ongoing training program. Beginning in 1998 only a handful of new churches were planted. By the year 2000, a survey indicated that there were over 1250 newly baptized believers and nearly 150 new churches were planted by just five of the seventy partners surveyed. The momentum has continued at a very rapid pace. By 2006 BORN reported that there were 3512 small groups and churches and over 36,544 baptisms were given. The vast majority of the new churches were a result of the Oral Bible storytelling movement that is gathering even greater strength as time goes by.

This tremendous outpouring of God's Spirit is evidence of the promise in Ezekiel. God is using unschooled ordinary men to plant churches and turn Bihar State upside down. Storytelling the Gospel has taken those that previously felt discouraged and defeated into powerful evangelists, church planters and trainers.

Since 1998, BORN has trained over 3500 grass roots church planters. Storytelling training is held nearly every month of the year. Today, the training has been effectively integrated into the training curriculum of all 70 ministries that are part of the BORN partnership. These newly trained church planters are now part of eighteen church planting movements (CPM's) among the

unreached people groups of Bihar. We are grateful to the Lord to witness such a powerful move of God.

The Oral Bible

The power of narrative is remarkable. Most of us know that we are more persuasive and more believable when we tell stories. Great communicators have long understood that stories are more memorable. All of us seem to be wired for stories. However, literacy-oriented Christians have been taught to think and communicate about the contents of the Bible in verses. Oral cultures communicate holistically in stories, songs and dramatic festivals. People from book cultures are eye-gate learners, oral learners are ear-gate learners. The distinctive of each must carefully considered as we think about using the appropriate communications strategy.

Storytellers bring us together to explore new means of building Christ centered relationships, and developing community expressed in ways that are familiar to the listener, and in ways that can be easily reproduced by ordinary Christian believers.

Yet, the individualism of literacy based traditions of western culture runs contrary to this notion. Storytelling the Gospel is a natural and culturally relevant way to change this paradigm. It moves us away from abstract and propositional forms of communicating Christ. Traditional Western models of evangelism/church planting typically result in individual conversions, or "extraction" of the new believer from their community and surroundings.

Oral Bible Storytelling occurs in natural affinity groups empowering group consideration of the truth, group commitment, and formation of fellowships of believers from extended family groups. Storytelling the gospel is a very non-threatening positive tool to present God's story of practical truth, integrity, and

human dignity. Many traditional oral cultures live in limited access, high-risk parts of the world. The stories from the Bible show practical examples lived out in the lives of ordinary people taking place in concrete and specific ways.

The definition of an Oral Bible is: "the accumulated Bible stories that have been told to an oral society."¹ These stories from the Bible must be told and re-told with complete Biblical accuracy. The Oral Bible provides a panoramic view of 50 to 225 key Bible stories starting with Genesis and continuing through the stories of the Apostles in the book of Acts. The Oral Bible engages the unreached with relevant means of interacting with the message of Christ. It brings access to the truth of Scripture and makes it interactive. Each Bible story we tell makes a positive change in the worldview of the listener.

Our challenge is to re-discover the power of storytelling in the same way that Jesus used stories, parables and proverbs to communicate effectively to the ordinary people of Israel.

Oral Bible Church Planting Movements

It was Donald McGavran that first introduced me to the concept of People Group Movements in his classic ground breaking book: "The Bridges of God". McGavran was born in India of missionary parents. He studied in the US and received a PhD from Columbia University. In 1923 he returned to India and served there for more than 25 years.

To the western mind, the idea of whole peoples coming to Christ seems unlikely. Yet the New Testament records large numbers of people coming to faith in a very short time. McGavran correctly points out some of the principles

¹ Making Disciples of Oral Learners. Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 54, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, Pattya Thailand 2004.

that the Apostle Paul used to facilitate the exponential growth of the early church. Paul understood that going to relatives or extended family and kinsmen of known believers was the most effective way to extend the Gospel message. People Movements flowed out into nearby regions to form a host of witnesses that followed family ties and friends that resulted in bringing thousands to Christ.

Acts 19:8-10 tells the story of how Paul took some of the believers from Ephesus with him to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. He spent two years training the disciples. As a result "all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord." The use of informal short term training methods and communication of the Gospel through extended family was a powerful means of multiplying the Word of God resulting in the explosive growth of the church.

David Garrison's book "Church Planting Movements" defines a church planting movement as "a Holy Spirit-inspired and Holy Spirit controlled process of planting indigenous churches among a specific people group or geographical location that will rapidly grow, mature and multiply themselves and spread spontaneously into the whole population without outside help."

Storytelling the Gospel fosters church planting movements among traditional oral cultures. As a missionary, my wife Carla and I have witnessed the power of storytelling the gospel in Latin America, West Africa and North India.

The Way Forward

In recent years, the orality movement has taken giant steps forward. Many are beginning to understand the importance of more effective and relevant oral communication to un-reached peoples. Several large international ministries like the International Mission Board (IMB), Campus Crusade for Christ, Wycliffe

Bible Translators, Youth With A Mission. Partners International has also been committed to encouraging the Oral Bible. During the past 12 months, PI has arranged 20 Bridges seminars in 9 countries, training 650 national church planters from 35 indigenous ministries in the storytelling method. Due to the tremendous response, plans for the next 12 months have doubled with a total of 40 seminars slated for training as many as 1200 indigenous evangelists. Many others are taking action to rethink old paradigms and return to more effective means of training others to reach out to those of traditional oral cultures. The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism met in Pattaya, Thailand in Oct of 2004 to discuss the major challenges to advance the gospel. One important outcome of the conference was the paper: "Making Disciples of Oral Learners" written by a group of 25 key leaders from around the globe to focus attention on the importance of oral communication.

In God's wisdom, subsequently there has emerged a diversity of training solutions and tools that address the challenge of orality. Four main categories have been identified:

1. **Primary Oral Learners**-Orality training solutions and opportunities for - those who belong to non-western traditional oral cultures.
2. **Secondary Oral Learners**- Orality training solutions for - those from literate cultures who prefer learning thru multi-media forms of communication.
3. **Cross-cultural Western Missionaries**- Orality sensitivity training solutions and opportunities for literates to reach out to non-literates.
4. **Multi-Media Products**- aimed at primary oral learners in story form ie: The Jesus Film, God's Story, Faith Comes by Hearing audio cassettes, and many others. Trans-World Radio is producing story-based programming for many countries around the globe.

The birth of the International Orality Network in 2004 has also been huge step forward to bring together many ministries to collaborate toward the goals for reaching the unreached using oral means.

While the challenge of reaching those of traditional oral cultures remains significant, it appears that God is at work to change the way we communicate to imitate the model and methods of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Jesus remains our greatest inspiration in all that we say and do. We are grateful that many are now returning to the Ancient Path as modeled by Jesus.