

ORALITY IN AMERICA

Orality Sphere - Love2020
Mission America Coalition



Listen, dear friends, to God's truth, bend your ears to what I tell you. I'm chewing on the morsel of a proverb; I'll let you in on the sweet old truths, Stories we heard from our fathers, counsel we learned at our mother's knee. We're not keeping this to ourselves, we're passing it along to the next generation—God's fame and fortune, the marvelous things he has done (Psalms 78:1-4 MSG).

Mission America Coalition

Mark Snowden, editor

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This book is a collaborative effort of the Orality Sphere of Mission America Coalition as part of Love2020. Members included: Mark Snowden and Jerry Wiles, co-leaders; Lucy Knight, Roy "Butch" Vernon, and Dave Imboden



PREFACE
Paul Cedar
Mission America Coalition

ORALITY was a new word and concept for me just a few years ago. I was introduced to this new world by the late Avery Willis, a dear friend of mine for many years. It was not difficult to recognize his enthusiasm for the subject.

This was much more than a concept for Avery. At the time, he was a key leader of one of the largest and far reaching Christian missions organizations in the world. He recognized that oral learning was an incredible vehicle for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with a large number of people groups around the globe that never had the opportunity to learn to read or write.

However, it did not take long for Avery and others to learn that this approach of sharing the Gospel was not limited to primitive tribes in isolated places. Quite to the contrary, studies have shown that a large percentage of educated people in the Western World and beyond have a preference for oral learning.

This is true in the United States as well. Studies show us that some 14% of Americans are below the basic standard for reading while another 36% are on a very basic level of literacy. That means that some 50% of American are basically oral learners.

Mark Snowden, one of the authors of this book, states, “At least half of all Americans struggle with literacy and reading comprehension skills, but there are many others that have an oral learning and communications preference. I would put the estimate at 60% to 70% of Americans have a preference for oral learning.” He then adds, “I believe that it is safe to say that God has wired us all for oral methods like stories, dramas, idioms/ proverbs, movies, documentaries, poetry, dance, chants, art and less abstract cultural forms.”

Jerry Wiles, another one of the authors, would fully agree with Mark. Jerry has said, “Orality methods and strategies are not just for the majority world or bedtime stories for children, but are also effective for adults in America and the West. Orality principles and methods are universal in their applications, and work well any place on earth and among all people groups.”

This has great implications for those of us who desire to share the Gospel of Jesus with those around us. If the majority of people in our society have a preference of oral communications, then we would do well to become more informed and equipped to communicate orally.”

Jerry went on to share another key insight. “Churches and ministries in the U.S. are becoming more aware that it is not enough to proclaim the Gospel. People need to hear, understand, process and remember it, and then to be able to pass it on to others (meaning reproducibility).”

I believe that to be true. Most churches have a majority of people who seldom, if ever, share the good news of Jesus with others. As a result, many of them struggle with guilt and feelings of inadequacy. It is simply that they have never been taught simple, reproducible oral tools to share with others.

As one who is committed to sharing the Gospel through every possible means, I have become increasingly interested in oral learning and communication. I believe that this book can be of great help to me, to you and to all that read it and who then put into practice the principles of oral communication. I counsel you to prepare yourself for a profitable adventure as you prayerfully read the pages of this book. You will be encouraged and equipped to more lovingly share with others the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Introduction

By David Swarr, executive director
International Orality Network

King Solomon, the leader of a nation and one of the wisest men who has ever lived said, “righteousness exalts a nation”. The Bible makes it clear that the rise and decline of nations is related to the degree that its people walk in the ways of God. And what better way is there to learn about righteousness and God’s ways than through the stories of His dealings with Israel and the Early Church recorded for us in the Bible? Yet today Bible illiteracy is a major problem not only in the USA but globally, and how are people to engage with the Word if they do not read?

In literate cultures the younger generation is moving away from reading, and in non-literate cultures a high percentages of the population do not have the benefit of reading. Global statistics reveal that 63% of the world population do not read because they are either illiterate, functionally illiterate or visually impaired. Another nearly 20% can read but prefer to learn through non-textual means. A whopping 82% of the world, approximately 5.7 billion people, are oral preference learners.

Regardless of the nation, language or location, reaching oral learners so that they can engage with the Word of God is one of the primary challenges facing the Church today. Effectiveness in evangelism and discipleship requires a major shift in our thinking, training, strategies and methods. Text driven approaches are proving to be ineffective, whether in the outback of Africa, in urban America and places in between.

In the past decade the more than 1200 ministries comprising the International Orality Network have been working to influence the Body of Christ to make disciples of all oral learners. These initiatives within the orality movement are helping us to understand the way oral learners receive, process, remember and pass on information. The papers in this compendium shed light on these important issues and raise questions that will cause each of us to give serious reflection to how we communicate the Word of God with this generation so that they will engage and walk in His ways.

Chapter 1: The Orality Movement

Jerry Wiles

The history of the Orality Movement around the world has been well documented by Dr. Grant Lovejoy, Dr. Tom Steffen and other respected writers tracking the Movement. A history of the International Orality Network can be found on the ION website.¹

For our purposes in this chapter, we will focus on “Why the Movement is working in America today.” One of the most basic reasons is that it is a rediscovery and implementation of the most effective ways and means that people have learned and communicated from the beginning of time. It has been said that orality is better experienced than explained, therefore, much of the Orality Training is based on demonstration, participation and then explanation.

Those who have been engaged as orality practitioners and trainers for any length of time have come to realize the value of focusing on learning a little, practicing a lot, implementing immediately and telling the (Story) stories often.

Prayer, Care, Share

Pastors and mission leaders in America are becoming interested in orality methods and strategies, initially, because they are going or sending people on short-term mission trips. However, once they have experienced the training and seen how it works, they recognize that it will work in their own churches and communities.

The following are some of the many reasons Orality is working today, both globally and locally:

- There is a growing awareness that methods of disciple-making must be cross-cultural, international, inter-ethnic, and reproducible in order to reach every person and all people groups.
- There is an increasing recognition that modern Western textual-based communication and instructional methods are effective for only a certain percentage of the world’s population.
- The message of the Good News of Jesus must be communicated in such a way that those who need it most can receive, respond and reproduce it.

¹ <http://www.oralty.net/sites/default/files/ION%20History%202015.02.23%20Edited.pdf>

- There is a growing amount of research that documents the value of a more communal, relational and oral approach, rather than modern textual methods.
- The Orality in Theological Education Consultations that have taken place over the past few years have accelerated the movement.
- The ION Orality Journals, and many articles, case studies and news items on Orality, Oral Cultures and Oral Learners have provided much needed resources and models for the Global Church and mission movements.
- The formation of the Oral Bible Task Force (Network) at Amsterdam 2,000 (an international gathering of itinerate evangelists) and the involvement of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization were key turning points for the movement.

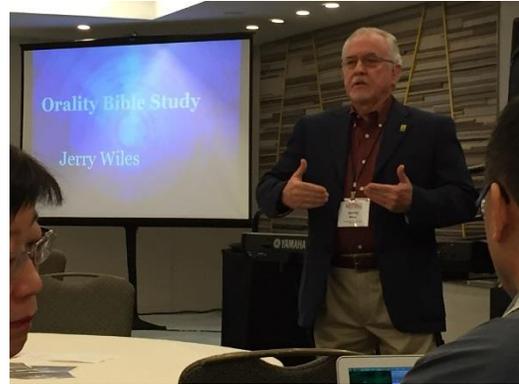


Figure 1 Jerry Wiles used oral methods while teaching at a Mission America Coalition annual gathering

Timeless Principles of Disciple-Making

Learning and internalizing the Word of God is at the heart of the Orality Movement. It's not something to go look up. When the Lord had Moses instruct the people, He put special emphasis on learning His Word and His Ways found only in the Bible:

You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise (Deuteronomy 11:18-19 ESV).

Important for all Christ-followers today is rediscovering the timeless principles of communicating the Gospel and making disciples, which we can learn from the Lord Jesus Himself. He used stories, parables and questions; created relationships and built community. God's message and methods were reproduced orally by His people for thousands of years. A small number of scribes recorded Scripture by hand and copies were scarce. And then came the invention of the printing press. With the advent of movable type and the printing press in 1440, the Church largely shifted over the next centuries. It became more dependent upon print-based or literate instruction, for the most part, neglecting the most effective ways that 90% or more of the people had

learned and communicated for thousands of years. It was if God’s Word was no longer “in your heart and in your soul,” but shoved in a bookshelf or collected dust on a tabletop.

We should consider this question, “Can we, as followers of Jesus, communicate, instruct, train and make disciples today in the ways He did 2,000 years ago?” The answer seems to be “Yes,” if we realize that the same God who indwelled Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago now lives in us, and that the same Holy Spirit is actively involved in redeeming His creation.



Figure 2 Orality training at Living Waters Int'l Offices in Stafford, Tex.

Lessons we can learn from the rapidly reproducing communities of faith and disciple-making movements are also applicable to the Church in America. The lessons we can learn from the movements in the Global South and the Early Church are more transferable to the Western World and North America, than trying to impose our Modern American ways on the rest of the world. Consider the fact that the Gospel of the kingdom spread throughout the entire populated world in the First Century by Orality-based methods. Of course, this was before radio, television, the Internet, cell phones or even the printing press. Simple and reproducible methods allowed every follower of Jesus to tell their story and His Story, every day, wherever they happened to be

trusting in the Holy Spirit to use the Scripture they knew, loved, and wanted to share in a timely manner.

While it is a great blessing to have at our disposal today many valuable technological and print-based resources, it is important to not create a dependency on them if we want our strategies and methods to be effective to the least and last, the unreached and unengaged people groups around the world as well as the lost person living just next door. When we start with oral ways and means, we have a way to reach any place and all people groups with what is in our heads and hearts, much like the Early Church communicated and made disciples. Once people have responded to the Gospel, we can then work as brothers and sisters together to determine what other resources and methods will be culturally appropriate to assist on our spiritual development journey.

Multiple Applications of Orality

The Orality Movement has grown and matured over the past forty or so years in modern Church history. Those in the movement continue to discover and learn multiple applications of oral methods. In addition to evangelism, disciple making, church

planting and church growth, the following are applications that may not at first be obvious:

Church mobilization	Poverty alleviation
Community health	Social justice issues
Conflict resolution	Team building
Integral mission	Trauma therapy training
Leadership formation	Unity and renewal
Organizational development	

Of course, we can go on to consider that orality methodologies can be useful to anyone seeking to be more effective in communicating, training or instructional activities. In a recent Orality Practitioner and Theological Education Consultation in Nairobi, Kenya, sponsored by the International Orality Network, Daystar University and Living Water Africa Region, many creative and innovative applications were reported. Stories of impact were told by people from many different countries of Orality Training that addressed issues of child abuse, disunity within local congregations and various needs that were not visible.

When children heard and understood the lessons from stories from the Bible, such as “Jesus calming the Storm” and the “Blind beggar, known as Bartimaeus,” it gave them boldness to speak out and call for help. It was discovered that many children were living in abusive relationships. When they heard those stories and began to open up and share their needs, it gave the pastors and church leaders a better understanding of their needs and how to help them.

From the story of Jesus Calming the Storm, children observed that during that time of trouble and difficulty the disciples went to Jesus for help. From the story of The Blind Beggar, Bartimaeus, they noted that he was crying out for Jesus to have mercy on him, to help him. The children learned from those stories that they could go to Jesus and call out for help. They realized that they didn’t have to keep their problems and hurts to themselves, they could open up and ask for help.

Fueling the Orality Movement in America

It is an amazing experience when the pastors and church leaders become aware of the real problems and difficulties that the people in their congregations are dealing with. Then, as a community, they are able to minister to them in a more effective manner.

One of the most significant reasons the Orality Movement is working today is that Christ followers realize the power of the Holy Spirit uses us to bring transformation through the presentation of His Word.

One of the lessons we learn from the story of Jesus Calming the Storm is the power of His Word. When we talk about Him rebuking the wind and speaking to the

waves, we ask, “Does His Word still have power today to change things and people?” We go on to consider, “Do our words have power?” It builds confidence that as we speak the Word of God, by telling the true stories from His Word, the Holy Spirit can touch hearts and change lives.

An important feature of Orality methods is the awareness that we don’t have to be great storytellers, because we have great stories to tell. We want to make sure our message and methods are biblical, understandable and reproducible. Biblical storying, or storytelling is just one stream of the Orality Movement. It has been referenced in other places in this document that the Orality Movement is very deep and wide and multi-faceted. Oral arts of all kinds are part of the movement: song and dance, poetry, proverbs, parables, chants, drama and many others. Then, today, we have an amazing amount of technological resources and methods are available to fuel the Orality Movement that did not exist just a few years ago. For additional resources and weblinks on Orality.net, ION’s website.

Orality as a Means of Renewing Churches in America

The Orality Movement began overseas, but it is not a majority world (Third World) mission methodology. Church leaders in the USA, after seeing how Orality impacted lives in Asia, Africa and Latin America, began applying lessons learned in their own churches and communities. Nursing homes, immigrant populations, street gangs, homeless people, children and prison ministries, are but a few applications. One church started a Sunday School class, which used oral methods. It quickly became the most popular class in their church. Churches and ministries in the Great Houston area where I live are seeing encouraging results from using orality methods with prison ministries, street gangs, refugees, homeless shelters and other compassion ministries.

There is no shortage of information or resources available to one who wants to discover why the Orality Movement is one of the most significant breakthroughs that has taken place in the Church World in the past 500 years.

A warning from a long-time practitioner is appropriate here. It could be a temptation for some to become too focused or enamored with trying to analyze the methods and techniques of the movement and miss the fact that it is actually the work of the Holy Spirit. The Orality Movement has a strong foundation of prayer. The Holy Spirit and prayer are paramount to comprehending the effectiveness and impact of biblically-based orality in the world today. As the movement has gained momentum over the past 15 years (and especially the past 5), there are some who would say that the Orality Movement could revolutionize the way the Christian World thinks and acts regarding communicating the Gospel and making disciples.

Rethinking, Unlearning and Relearning

Simplicity and reproducibility are two of the major reasons that oral methods continue working today. Simplicity does not mean simplistic or shallow. Actually, once

pastors and church leaders have experienced oral methods for themselves, they are surprised at how profound spiritual truth can be communicated and experienced. In fact, behavior change happens better and faster by addressing orality, than through text or literacy-based methods.

Orality training and practices level the playing ground so that everyone who has experienced the new birth, the grace and power of God, can participate in God's kingdom work and the redemptive activity of the Holy Spirit. In many places around the world we have observed how children as young as five years old, and women who have never learned to read or write, learn and retell the true stories from the Word of God. When pastors and mission leaders see this, they begin to catch a vision of how they can use Orality methods to equip, train, activate and mobilize storytelling evangelists at every age and socio-economic level.

Sometimes we in America may need to consider whether there are better ways of doing church and missions, than what we have been doing over the past few hundred years. Orality training often challenges many to re-evaluate how much and what people need to know in order to have a relationship with the Living God and become a reproducing follower of Jesus. How much and what, not based on 2,000 years of Church history and traditions, but based on the Scriptures, with a focus on the life, the Spirit and teachings of Jesus. The Orality Movement acts as a revolution helping many to recognize that some things our churches are doing have become more ritualized, complicated and disingenuous than they need to be, and that there is a great need to get back to the roots of how it all began 2,000 years ago.

We are definitely in a season of major transition in the life of the Church in America. That change, in part, is a return to the roots of how the Church was born and advanced in the early centuries.

Many of us who have been involved in the Orality Movement over the years are hearing reports and testimonies of how it is being replicated, many times to the fourth and fifth generations. When returning to regions where Orality training has been conducted over the past few years, the stories of impact are astounding. The Holy Spirit often gives creativity and innovative ways and means to His people, beyond what they were trained to do. And it spreads.

The Work of the Holy Spirit is Key

Being flexible, adaptable and open to change (which is the work of the Holy Spirit) are very important factors. They are vital in the effectiveness of the work of the



Figure 3 Immigrants and refugees, such as these Lebanese children often arrive in America as oral learners for life.

kingdom of God in America today. Being too rigid, formularized and set in our ways can restrict the work of the Spirit. The rivers of Living Water that Jesus spoke of in John 7 is analogous of the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit and His creative and unlimited capacity of carrying out His Kingdom purposes here on earth.

Someone has referred to the Orality Movement as another expression of the Jesus Movement--not the Jesus Movement in the USA during the 1970s, but the original Jesus movement that started 2,000 years ago. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. "It would be important to realize that anything He has done at any time, He can do now, and that anything He has done anywhere, He can do here. And, anything He has done through anyone, He can do through you," as A. W. Tozer said long ago. Dr. Thom Wolf, respected missiologist and former pastor in Los Angeles, has suggested at a meeting I attended that the 21st Century Church could look a lot like the 1st Century Church.

Ultimately, the reason the Orality Movement is working today is that God is honoring His Word as people hear it, understand it, and are able to process it, remember it and pass it on. Someone has said that the Gospel came to us, on the way to someone else. A friend of mine, as a departing statement says, "Keep the faith, just don't keep it to yourself."

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Discussion Questions:

1. Name one of the most basic reasons why Orality is working today.
2. Why are pastors and church leaders in America becoming more interested and involved in Orality?
3. Why is the Orality Movement gaining momentum, globally and locally?
4. List some applications of Orality Methodologies?
5. Where can one find the best lessons and fruitful practices for Orality Methods and Strategies?
6. Name some key factors that make Orality Training, Methods and Strategies effective?
7. What are some examples from the Early Church that enabled the Gospel to spread throughout the entire populated world at that time?
8. What lessons can we learn from the life, Spirit and teaching of Jesus, and the Early Church, that can be effective in ministry and mission strategies today?

Chapter 2: Orality and Gospel Advance: Impacting Disciple-making and Church Planting²

Mark Snowden

In Lansing, Mich., a group of us were learning how to survey communities to understand lostness. My nervous partner was a pastor. When he met a biker, he stammered, “If you died tonight do you know where you’d spend eternity?” The biker turned stone-faced and said, “I’m going to have to ask you men to leave my property.” As we exited the driveway, I heard the pastor say, “I guess we’d better try something else, eh?” The literate evangelism approach he had been trained to present went right out the window. We began to pray as we walked. Our zeal to share Jesus became wrapped in a love for others that made us care for those we might encounter.

It wasn’t too long until we met an 18 year-old carrying two huge bags of disposable diapers. We stopped and asked how we could pray for him. He said he was really scared to be a new Dad. The diapers were for the baby that he and his 19 year-old girlfriend were expecting. It impressed him that we prayed for him right on the spot. We then offered to lead a Bible study in his home with his girlfriend. He said, “You mean I could invite anyone I wanted to attend?” We said yes and arranged a time the very next week when someone from the church could start.

The PRAYER-CARE-SHARE strategy of LOVE2020 works particularly well in the context of orality. It means conveying the Gospel aurally (talking), but also using oral methods that involve listening and intentionally engaging in highly relational disciple-making in small groups that can become churches.

Steve Hawthorne, editor of the *Perspectives* course, once told me he had noticed a trend that the front door of the church is the home. And when you take God’s Word in oral formats into a home to study, then it becomes a larger doorway for praying, caring, and sharing Jesus.

The Challenge of Advancing the Gospel in the U.S.

We have a mixture of people who are far from a relationship with Jesus in America. One size does not fit all. A colleague once boasted, “There’s only two people in America – lost and saved.” Generic presentations that treat all lost the same rarely produces a harvest. Yet, we buy what worked over here. And we’ll try what might have worked over there. By ignoring learning preferences – typically oral or literate – an

² Excerpts from this chapter were first published in *EMQ – Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Wheaton College.

evangelistic approach is often unnecessarily confrontational or doesn't relate to their thinking preferences. We just can't keep blaming hard hearts among the lost. Meanwhile, they're looking for anything that will fill their empty spiritual void.

The Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) studies church membership reports from 236 religious organizations. Their 2010 report showed 50 million people in the U.S. (16.2%) claim to be part of Evangelical Protestant churches, while 158 million (51.2%) are unclaimed by any religious organization. By this report, more than 83.8% are not considered evangelicals.³ ARDA considers Evangelical Protestants as those who “emphasize a personal relationship with Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and the importance of sharing faith with non-believers.”⁴

As documented in *The Great Evangelical Recession*, John Dickerson noted that only seven to nine percent of Americans were actually evangelicals. That was about half the ARDA's reports. The studies that Dickerson referenced put the actual number of evangelicals closer to 22 to 28 million. Evangelicals have lost a net total of 2.6 million church members between 2000 and 2010. Dickerson also points to studies in which evangelicals have diminished cultural influence.⁵

Disciple-making is clearly needed as never before across America.

Because of strong church planting statistics from mission agency reports overseas, many evangelical agencies have turned to church planting as a solution to lostness. In the U.S., this frequently means a well-funded approach by highly educated pastor/planters. On average this results in 73 attending per church.⁶ After four years, one-third do not survive.⁷



Figure 4 Mark Snowden models small groups using Bible Storying to a group of missions leaders in South Carolina

³ “U.S. Membership Reports,” The Association of Religion Data Archives, http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/u/rcms2010_99_US_name_2010.asp, accessed 11-20-15.

⁴ “Evangelical Protestant Denominations,” The Association of Religion Data Archives, <http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/evangelical.asp>, accessed 11-20-15.

⁵ John S. Dickerson, *The Great Evangelical Recession* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013) 26.

⁶ Ed Stetzer and Warren Bird, *Viral Churches* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010) 145.

⁷ Ed Stetzer and Phillip Conner, “How Many Church Plants *Really* Survive and Why?” (Part 2 of the Church Planting Survivability and Health Study) North American Mission Board, SBC 3-07, 2.

Getting a grip on lostness drives how we respond. Do you conduct a Gospel tract give-away? Buy time on the Gospel radio station? Conduct a crusade at the convention center? How much money and how many people are needed to change the community's spiritual dynamic? One St. Louis, Mo., pastor called me to say he took my challenge to drive through multi-housing projects at 11:00 one night. He was astounded to see drug deals, prostitutes, and harsh stares that pushed him past his comfort zone. Yet, he had been clueless for thinking his community was calm and law-abiding. Had he engaged them in conversation, he would have learned that biblical illiteracy would have been rampant.

A group of international missions leaders gathered in 2000 to address the global need for disciple-making. The group quickly woke up to the staggering amount of people and money that it would take given their current methodologies of evangelism classroom training, curriculum-based Bible studies, and fully-funded missionaries. Their resolve should echo across every evangelical church in America:

“No longer could we settle for methods that just *added* disciples to the kingdom. Making disciples in the hardest places in the world—crossing the challenging religious, cultural, and political barriers—would take multiplication.”⁸

And when you take multiplication seriously, then orality is a God-given tool. God has already wired us for stories, poems, chants, drama, and art that we can easily pass along. The *Reese Chronological Bible* has a 32 page index listing 500 to 700 stories.⁹ Perhaps there are more! Is it possible that these stories are there to help us speak into the homes of America's (1) immigrants, (2) people grouped in geographical clusters, and (3) in interest groups like bikers or cowboys?

When you take multiplication seriously, then orality is a God-given tool.

Making Disciple-makers

Our churches typically lack disciple-making effectiveness. Because Americans are increasingly weak in their Bible knowledge, they are creating their own theology. In a 2009 study, Barna Research Group found:

“By a three to one margin (71% to 26%) adults noted that they are personally more likely to develop their own set of religious beliefs than to accept a comprehensive set of beliefs taught by a particular church. Although born again Christians were among the segments least likely to adopt the a la carte approach to beliefs, a considerable majority even of born again adults (61%) has taken that route. Leading the charge in the

⁸ Avery T. Willis, Jr., and Mark Snowden, *Truth That Sticks: Communicating Velcro Truths in a Teflon World* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2010) 184.

⁹ Edward Reese, *The Reese Chronological Bible* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1977) index.

move to customize one's package of beliefs are people under the age of 25, among whom more than four out of five (82%) said they develop their own combination of beliefs rather than adopt a set proposed by a church."¹⁰ Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (KJV).

Bible scholars say that the word *hearing* in the original Greek means to receive a report in order to take action. Do lost people in America have the ability to actually understand and how do they take action? How do they count the cost of obedience? Church leaders must provide a context for scripture passages they want to use and convey enough compelling details through oral methods to make a significant life change.

Gary Coomes works with discipleship at Living Hope Wesleyan Church in Madison, South Dakota. They currently have 23 small groups, each with 8 to 12 participants. Living Hope uses oral methods in Bible studies. He said, "We have had significant interest, participation, and spiritual growth with Storying." Coomes got permission to share Vi's story. She was a new follower of Jesus that has clearly grown spiritually. Vi has taken the stories and used them to prevent a friend from committing suicide, joined in with her husband to share the gospel with a delivery man, and helped another sister in Christ lead a non-believer to faith. Coomes added, "Vi has retold many of the stories from Scripture, remembering God's word. Many of us are better equipped and fruitful as we share our stories, hear their stories, and live God's story together."¹¹

Rethinking Orality in Our Churches

While I was attending a Purpose Driven Church workshop in 2005, I heard Rick Warren tell attendees to place greeters at their church doors that represented the kind of person that they wanted their church to attract. If that's 90 year-old men, then that's okay.¹² Now, who do you think that literacy-oriented churches best attract? Three studies by the University of Nebraska, the American Sociological Association, and University of Virginia showed that whites in America with high school educations declined in their frequency of church attendance, while those with college degrees were the most frequent attenders today.¹³

Well-meaning churches attract those who are like them whenever they orient toward those with a literate worldview preference. Pastors and most church leaders are part of America's literate elite. They read every day and read to learn because that's what

¹⁰ "Christianity is No Longer America's Default Faith," Barna Group, 1-28-09, <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/faith-spirituality/15-christianity-is-no-longer-americans-default-faith#.VIMdiKSFPmI>, accessed 11/23/15

¹¹ Mark Snowden interview with Gary Coomes via email, June 11, 2015.

¹² Mark Snowden personal recollection from the Purpose Driven Church Conference, Lake Forest, Calif., May 2005.

¹³ Nicole Neroulias, "Church Attendance Dropping among Less-educated Whites," Huffington Post, 8-25-11 www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/25/church-attendance-dropping_n_937138.html, accessed 11-20-15.

they prefer. Looking across the spectrum of literacy in America, these are 13% that comprise the literate elite.¹⁴

Almost everything that most church leaders typically are taught to do supports a literate worldview. Here are just a few. Use the white space to add your own.

- Evangelize with tracts using disconnected Bible verses
- Use student quarterlies
- Project scripture and songs
- Read verses from all over the Bible
- One-way communications that offers no feedback
- Outlined presentations using three or more points
- Bible stories become anecdotal illustrations
- Interrupt Bible stories to exegete a section, never telling the story unbroken
- Lecture-based discipleship with no accountability
- Lacking transparency, vulnerability, or genuineness
- Bulletins are the primary way to inform
- Use fill-in-the-blank sermon or lesson handouts
- Summarize biblical narratives
- Conduct detailed word studies
- Lists (like this!)

Pastors and Bible study teachers that exegete texts for others create a non-reproducible environment by church members, whether they can read or not. Members can only invite others to join them in being preached at or lectured to. They are not making disciples Jesus commanded in Matthew 28:18-20. Typically, literate worldview church leaders rarely attract people other than those who are like themselves. Making disciples of all people, including oral learners, must become a priority.

Pastors and Bible study teachers that exegete texts for others create a non-reproducible environment by church members, whether they can read or not.

Some pastors do get it and are bringing significant spiritual growth to their congregations. Ed Litton pastors Redemption Church in North Mobile, Ala. He said, “I planted a church in New Mexico and found the people to be very real in their relationships. However, when pastoring in America’s Deep South, we found over four to five years that we were not making disciples. I was resistant to orality because I thought

¹⁴ “A First Look at America’s Adults in the 21st Century: National Assessment of Adult Literacy,” U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, 2003, January 2009, 1–4, 15. Available online at http://nces.ed.gov/NAAL/PDF/2006470_1.PDF (accessed 11-23-15).

it would just be people sitting round pooling their ignorance. However, that hasn't been that case at all." Litton and two men he was discipling traveled to Real Life Ministries in Post Falls, Id., and got training on making small groups come alive using orality. Redemption Church is now making the transition in 45 to 50 small groups with 12 to 16 participants each. Grow Groups have become cross-generational with those aged in their 80s attending with those in their 20s. "I wasn't convinced until I personally experienced it," Litton said. "The Holy Spirit teaches so effectively and powerfully. It's not about 'stumping the teacher,' but allowing Him to provide what we need."¹⁵



Figure 5 Mark Snowden uses creative learning methods in training among church leaders like these in Richmond, Va. shooting a (toy) crossbow. Snowden's workshops are called TruthSticks Training.

Ella Mitchell expressed concern for the oral expressions that have been lost among the African-American community. In recounting changes, Dr. Mitchell wrote, "Perhaps the most damaging of all errors copied from others was the exaggerated fascination with print. It implied that there was no further need for the powerful oral tradition."¹⁶ And so others filled in the gap. "There are among blacks far more options for entertainment and movement as well as a wider range of possible relationships."¹⁷

Blurring the Lines between Evangelism and Discipleship

Is it possible that discipleship precedes evangelism? When it comes to relational small groups that use oral equipping methods, it HAS to be that way. Jim Putman, who pastors Real Life Ministries, credits the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit gives us the power (Acts 1:8) to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20).

It's the responsibility of every church to make disciples. I also believe that the Word tells us that it is the job of every pastor to develop a system that

¹⁵ Mark Snowden phone interview with Ed Litton 11-23-15.

¹⁶ Ella P. Mitchell, "Black Nature," *Black Church Life-Styles: Rediscovering the Black Christian Experience*, Emmanuel L. McCall, compiler (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1986) 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 66.

will equip and enable all of the people in the church to be in the relational process for discipleship.¹⁸

As Jesus said, it is impossible that new wine can go into old wineskins without bursting them apart (Matthew 9:17, Mark 2:22, Luke 5:37). Orality is tough for some to embrace. Starting with new believers who can become small group leaders is important. However, if pastors become hungry enough to ask for help, then orality is the way to go as the new standard for disciple-making efforts. Will these pastors ask, “What is it going to take to reach my community, my state, and all people everywhere to faith in Christ?”

Putman framed this perspective:

When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples, He did not say, “Now go find another disciple-maker to follow.” He sent them together, usually in groups of two, working together in accountable relationships. They were mature, not perfect. It is the same for us.¹⁹

Orality permeates decision-making. The lost notice how a Christian makes choices. They listen to how a follower of Jesus talks and walks their talk. They absorb the kind of lifestyle one who is born-again lives out in a lost world. And these are the messages (verbal and non-verbal; oral and literate) that we communicate to those who are not yet believers.

“We see storying bridge gaps not only between age ranges, but across ethnic and cultural differences.”

Jared Burwell pastors NewStory Communities in Seattle, a church comprised of young adults; Millennials. He noted that they often use Bible Storying in their Sunday Gatherings and found how to use it as a way to care and share throughout the week. “As part of the curriculum, we have asked our church to try to retell one of the stories during the week.... Eventually, we want to use storying in our outreach youth group for discipleship and as a training tool for them to reach their friends and schoolmates with the gospel..... We see storying bridge gaps not only between age ranges, but across ethnic and cultural differences as well. It seems to work among the urban population in which we are situated.”²⁰

If evangelizing isn’t bringing new people to faith in Christ, step back and take a hard look at your discipleship efforts. You can’t separate them, but you can intentionally address them as the Holy Spirit leads.

Lowell Dooley leads a Bible study in Gadsden, Ala. He attended TruthSticks Training, a Bible Storying training workshop that I lead. His group was already using *Story Thru the Bible* published by Walk Thru the Bible. Dooley said, “This class has now grown in a vast age range. Our youngest is about 17 and the oldest in their 60s. These folks are engaged. The youth that have come to the class have really shined so the older

¹⁸ Jim Putman, *Real Life Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress 2010) 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 148.

²⁰ Mark Snowden email interview with Jared Burwell, 11-23-15.

adults have had to up their participation.” “What about me?” Dooley added. “I’ve never, in my 52 years, been in God’s Word like I have since January. God has grown me exponentially in Him. The questions and discussion in the class have helped develop me in my Spiritual walk. It has even bled over into our marriage in that we are far more dynamically engaged in God's Word together as a couple.”²¹

Church leaders often question the spiritual depth of a Bible study if and when oral methods are used. Litton’s and Dooley’s experiences set in traditional Alabama are typical of the depth experienced by the small group and by the leader, too.

Jesus said that what a person says reveals what’s in the heart (Luke 6:45). Tracking their spiritual development flows without being forced or fake. Dead in sin? Ignorant infant? Selfish child? Ministering young adult? Reproducing parent? Are you listening for correct facts or are you getting to the heart of a person’s worldview?

Inductive Bible study methods provide the leader with listening opportunities; they know exactly who in their group is going deep and why.

The teacher should not go deep and not know if anyone goes with him. Inductive Bible study methods provide the leader with listening opportunities; they know exactly who in their group is going deep and why. In traditional discipleship programs, the teacher might go deep, but since there’s no interaction as he goes, the class participants may or may not be growing in their faith.

The feedback loop insures understanding – and depth.

Churches that use oral-friendly methods benefit in specific ways.

1. Evangelism becomes more conversational and relevant. Scripture in the form of specific stories address deeply held values.
2. Streamlines and focuses church priorities. A decision to make disciples as a priority puts everything else the church does in line with the Great Commission.
3. Simplifies the discipleship process. You don’t have to be a biblical expert to lead a small group.
4. Multiplies small groups leading to numerical growth. Reproducibility is the key. New leaders are constantly mentored. Each new group must examine three things: Can this become a new church? Can this become a new small group? Should we become part of another existing group?
5. Experiential Bible study engages not just multiple senses, but often the emotions. And emotions etch memories.
6. Bible study is applicable to real life. It’s not theoretical. We know this works.
7. Participants can no longer “hide,” but will be expected to grow spiritually, apply the lesson, and be held accountable.

²¹ Mark Snowden email exchange with Lowell Dooley, May 9, 2015.

Entering the world of the oral learner is exciting and well worth the time invested. It is certainly not business as usual, but captures the attention – and hearts – those who need a relationship with Jesus, other believers, and the opportunity to become a fruit-bearing to the glory of God.

Discussion questions:

1. How is the home the front door of the church?
2. Describe lostness in your community:
 - a. Among immigrant people groups?
 - b. Among groups living in close proximity like college dorms and work camps?
 - c. Among people who have a common interest such as bikers or cowboys?
3. How does orality better equip believers to share Christ with individuals and groups?
4. Many Christians can quote John 3:16 from memory. What is the Bible story in which this verse originates? How does it provide a powerful context that is easy to share?
5. How do churches inadvertently appeal to the literate elite in their community?
6. What are some ways your church can communicate Bible truths better with those who have an oral learning preference?
7. Draw three columns and use it as a plan for your next Bible study. Title them: (1) Life Issues: What life issues exist among those whom you are discipling? (2) Bible Stories: What Bible stories best address each one? (3) Questions: How does asking open-ended questions in a small group help them discover Bible Truths for themselves?



Figure 6 Oral methods even impact where disciple-making occurs. Which Bible study setting would you rather enter? Keys to small group success involve being relational, supportive, transparent, and accountability. Source: Truth That Sticks (NavPress)

CHAPTER 3: AWAKENING TO AMERICA'S SPIRITUAL CLIMATE

R. Butch Vernon

A young seminary graduate was excited about being called to pastor his first rural, South Carolina Southern Baptist congregation. This young man was driven by Jesus' command to 'make disciples' and so he went to work.

Soon the little country church began to see growth, not just in numbers but also in new conversions. Since the young pastor felt personally responsible for these new spiritual babies, he went out of his way to provide the resources for growth that he was familiar with through his own church and seminary background.

He began a new Sunday School class just for these new believers and others who were interested in Christianity, but who hadn't taken the step of conversion yet. He ordered new Sunday School curriculum and went over the lessons each week, really focusing on the daily discipleship materials that were included in the lessons.

He was truly excited about the obvious changes in the lives of those who had made professions of faith in Christ as their Savior. Each week there were testimonies of conviction of sin and witnessing experiences that these new believers were experiencing. They were on fire!

Yet, each week as they came together for class he was finding that not a single individual had read the lesson nor taken advantage of the spiritual resources that he had gone to great pains to deliver to them. Initially he was quite discouraged, and somewhat confused about this missing ingredient in their discipleship.

He had one student whose life had changed more than anyone else. Everything in this man's life had changed because of his profession of faith in Christ. He was a blue-collar worker who was telling everyone about his new-found faith.

One Sunday morning in Sunday School the young pastor, without even thinking about it, asked this excited new believer to read the passage for the lesson. He read it, but it was a very painful experience for everyone involved. He tripped over words, he stammered, he paused, he struggled and finally he finished. The pastor and everyone in the room was highly uncomfortable and the newly saved convert was extremely embarrassed.

The reality of the situation hit the young pastor like a brick. The people he was reaching weren't being rebellious by not studying the lessons, they were simply unable to read the lessons for themselves. As excited as they were about their faith, they were

not equipped to use the resources that were second nature to their highly literate pastor. They could read a few words but not more complicated material.

Americans and Orality

When Americans first hear about orality, one of the initial responses is often something like “Oh yes, those poor people who can’t afford education need something like that.” This writers’ initial interest in orality was because of work being done in Haiti where the need for non-literate options was very obvious. A local Haitian Church leader who was responsible for over eighty congregations believed that the literacy rate among their parishioners was around five percent.

What is not as obvious to the common observer is the need for orality in more educated nations like America. The National Assessment for Adult Literacy which was done in 1992 and again in 2003, showed essentially the same percentages over the two studies.²² Around 14 percent of Americans essentially couldn’t read. Another 29 percent couldn’t read more complicated literature. The Los Angeles Times in an article dated September 2009 showed that 20 percent of Americans between the ages of 45 and 65 couldn’t even read well enough to understand the instructions on a medicine bottle!

Half of all Americans struggle with reading skills. Yet, our churches remained geared to the highest literacy levels. No wonder unchurched Americans tune out approaches from Christians! We relate information in the ways *we* prefer to deliver it, rather than in the ways those who need it most want to receive it. Yet there are 150 million or more Americans who are being missed.

In 2003, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) divided literacy into four groupings: *below basic*, *basic*, *intermediate*, and *proficient*. These designations replace the terms such as illiterate and functionally illiterate, which were used in the 1992 survey.



²² National Center for Education Statistics, “National Assessment of Adult Literacy: A First Look at America’s Adults in the 21st Century,” U.S. Department of Education. Available online at www.nces.ed.gov/NAAL/PDF/2006470_1.PDF (accessed 1 February 2015).

1. Below Basic—14 percent (1 in 7)
 - Sign name, find medicine dosage (only 3 to 4 percent are purely non-readers)
2. Basic—36 percent
 - Compare ticket prices; read pamphlet
3. Intermediate—37 percent
 - Reads novels and for leisure
 - Ability to scan the Internet for information
 - Connects through social media, such as Facebook
 - Can read maps and charts, such as checkbook when required
4. Proficient—13 percent
 - Finding, maintaining, and using info from continuous paragraphs
 - Only one-third of all college graduates

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2003 affirmed that essentially the same percentage of people had inadequate reading skills as their 1992 landmark study, even though billions of dollars had been spent to improve education during that period. Talkingpage.org says that according to the National Adult Literacy Survey of 1993, there were about 90 million Americans or 55% of the adult population who were functionally illiterate. That would be the equivalent to the population of Dallas, Texas, multiplied by 90. Four out of ten job applicants tested in 1992 for basic reading and/or math skills lacked the mastery necessary for the job they sought. Over 50% of surveyed manufacturing companies indicate that more than half of their front line workers have serious literacy problems.²³

In other words, on average, somewhere around four out of 10 folks that the Church in America ministers to can't read the materials that are typically considered to be foundational to spiritual growth. The question the Church in America must wrestle with is "who's responsible for reaching these people where they really are now, not where we want them to be?"

According to William J. Bennet in *A Nation Still at Risk* "the skills gap in written communications such as memos, letters, and technical reports is especially wide. Nearly three-quarters—72 percent—of incoming high school graduates are viewed as deficient in basic English writing skills, including grammar and spelling."

In 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) published a report, *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence*, which provided ample evidence of the decline of reading for pleasure, particularly among the young. To wit: Nearly half of Americans ages 18 to

²³ For more, go to <http://www.talkingpage.org/NIAP2007.pdf>

24 read no books for pleasure; Americans ages 15 to 24 spend only between 7 and 10 minutes per day reading voluntarily; and two thirds of college freshmen read for pleasure for less than an hour per week or not at all. As Sunil Iyengar, director of the NEA's Office of Research and Analysis and the lead author of the report, told me, "We can no longer take the presence of books in the home for granted. Reading on one's own — not in a required sense, but doing it because you want to read — that skill has to be cultivated at an early age."²⁴

Yet across the nation those that are introduced to these types of statistics for the first time are usually shocked almost to the point of unbelief. How can there possibly be so many in our midst who cannot learn in the way that is considered the norm in the Christian community? An equally confusing question is how can this have taken place without more Americans being aware of it? In talking to a wide range of seminary graduates it seems that most seminarians leave school with almost no instruction or teaching on orality.

One of the major problems in finding out exact numbers in dealing with literacy is the stigma that goes along with struggling to read continuous paragraphs and useful reading comprehension. At least half of all Americans will go to great lengths to hide their struggles with reading. Additionally those who don't or won't read very often have developed amazing coping skills to hide or cover up their inability to do what the reading world takes for granted.

At least half of all Americans will go to great lengths to hide their struggles with reading.

Another factor in getting accurate numbers are the interests of those who are responsible for collecting the data itself. The two groups most responsible for gathering information are two of the largest bureaucracies in the nation. Those in the national, state, and local education system have a vested interest to do all that they can to see that the numbers reflect as positive a light as possible on literacy rates and the effectiveness of their education system. They are not intentionally lying, but they begin the process with a very powerful personal bias.

The national government desires to portray America's literacy status as positively as possible.

The census in 1970 instead of posing questions about actual skills, simply asked adults how many years of school they had attended. More than 5 percent of those the census reached replied that they had had less than a fifth grade education. For no known reason, the government assumed that

²⁴ <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/people-of-the-screen>

four fifths of these people probably could read and, on this dangerous assumption, it was publicly announced that 99 percent of all American adults could read and write.²⁵

Again, bureaucracies tend to have a built in self-preservation factor.

That brings up another problem. Who defines who is literate? In some countries if you can sign your name you are considered literate. In the United States, it has been common to define literacy by how many years someone has attended school. Should those measurements define literacy? Shouldn't literacy be defined with some understanding of a persons' ability to read?



Figure 7 Steve Bruce telling a Bible story during STS-Simply the Story training in Nicholasville, Ky.

Secondary Orality in America

Before moving on, it is important to recognize another group of learners that are somewhat undiscovered in America. Those are the people who practice secondary orality. These are individuals who can read, many who may have advanced degrees or other technical training, but they prefer to get their information from oral sources.²⁶

The number who prefer to learn in an oral fashion is not precisely known, but there are many today who would never imagine using a manual or instruction book to learn how to use new equipment or develop a new skill. Instead they go to the worldwide web and watch a YouTube video, or listen to a Ted Talk to find information. As a matter of fact, the growth of the use of the Internet is leading more and more Americans of all ages to different preferences of learning.

²⁵ Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America* (Plume, 1986).

²⁶ Secondary oral communicators was defined as people who depend on electronic audio and visual communications (multimedia). It is said that in some developing countries people are moving directly from primary orality to secondary orality without passing through an orientation to print. So as nonprint media become available to them, they move from being primary oral societies to becoming multimedia societies, skipping the stage of literacy. Definition is from *Making Disciples of Oral Learners*, Lausanne and ION, 2005, p. 120.

An issue that is often ignored is brought up in the orality trainings provided by Simply The Story (one of a number of ministries that teach orality and storytelling) is the question of who prepares the material for everyone else. In the National Assessment of Adult Literacy research project, the fourth group is listed as those who are highly literate. That group makes up 13 percent of the American population. These people love to read. The majority of their information input comes from books, magazines and reports. The people in this group are the ones who would very naturally be called upon to prepare discipleship materials, Sunday School curriculum and other spiritual growth materials.

What would someone expect the materials prepared by these individuals to be like? Highly literate people would quite naturally prepare material in a fashion that would appeal to the style in which they best learn. It is not that they have a planned agenda, it is just the way they prefer to learn and so by default it becomes the way in which they teach. However this methodology is not at all what the oral learners need nor is the information packaged in a way that they can understand.

There is a growing need in our rapidly changing culture to consider other means of teaching, training and education to reach the growing number of Americans who either cannot or prefer to not learn through reading.

Oral means of transferring information are becoming more and more important to not only those who are serving across the world in a variety of missions settings, but oral methodologies are meeting more and more training needs right here at home as well.

Orality and Chronological Bible Storying are not THE answer to discipleship and evangelism issues in the modern American church. However, they are tools that can, and should be considered as being important for a very large segment of those we have been called to reach with the Gospel.

There is a growing need to consider other means of teaching, training and education to reach the growing number of Americans who either cannot or prefer to not learn through reading.

Embracing Orality to Bring Transformational Change in America

In the 1970's there were very few Spanish speaking individuals across places like Kentucky. Today, there is a thriving Hispanic community that stretches into a wide portion of the state. This same reality is facing churches and ministry leaders all across America. Churches have been scrambling for over a decade to bring in qualified Spanish speaking pastors and leaders. Why? Simply because they recognize the need to reach a group of people who speak a different language with the Gospel. That is not very complicated.

An even larger group of people exists in the USA today. They are from every walk of life, from every cultural and religious background and from different educational

experiences. Their commonality is that they either need to or prefer to learn in a manner that not many are using to teach them. Isn't it time for the Church in America to begin to scramble to find individuals, methodologies and ministries to come along side those already doing the work and help them to reach this vast field that is ripe unto harvest?

And when seminary-trained church leaders go to make disciple-makers, they will be able to make disciples of all people, even oral learners.

Discussion questions:

1. Using the criteria in this chapter, would you consider yourself an oral learner or a literate learner?
2. If you prefer to learn through *oral* processes, describe how that bias would impact your disciple-making efforts.
3. If you prefer to learn through *literate* processes, describe how that bias would impact your disciple-making efforts.
4. How does disciple-making (or lack of it) drive your church's priorities?
5. What changes does your church need to make to make disciples of all people?



Figure 8 This artist painted a highly symbolic mural in the basement of Seventh Street Baptist Church in Baltimore, Md. Such artwork is considered "oral" since it carries meaning and was intended as a scriptural learning tool.

Chapter 4: Oral Bibles in America

The Authority of Bible Stories

Rick Leatherwood

When Pontius Pilate became governor of Judea, the word of God came to a man named John who began preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
 "Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight..." (John 1:23)

Most people recall John as wearing camel's hair, eating locusts and think of him as something of a wild man. But Jesus said there was no one who had ever been born who was greater than John. And as we look at Scripture a little closer, we discover that John was not a wild man. John was the man who had the word of God.

It was not because of John's clothes, or the food he ate, but it was because John had the word of God that people went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan, confessing their sins, and being baptized by him in the Jordan River. John had authority that had come to him as a consequence of understanding, believing, and accepting the word of God. John had entered the kingdom of God.² We can do the same.²⁷

Jesus said, "Martha, Martha. You are distracted by so many things, but only one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen the better part" (Luke 10:41). Like Martha, we too are often distracted and allow all kind of things to sidetrack us from that which is really needed. What is really needed? Jesus's reply to Martha infers it is listening to the word of God as Mary did, and understanding and living in accordance with that word.

Hearing the word of God is very much an issue in the church in the United States today. We are greatly distracted by the glitz of Hollywood, the power of the Internet, the iPhone, and the media in general. These words have brought confusion along with changing morals of the secular humanism that has engulfed our culture. Consequently, we no longer believe the word of God the way Americans once did. And our culture, our society, and the world suffer as a result.

²⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Eerdmans, 1990 edition).



Figure 9 Omar Segovia (center) practices telling a Bible storying to other church planters in Springfield, Mo.

Why God's Word Matters

As Jesus explained the parable of the sower to His disciples, He said, *the seed is the word of God*, but the cares and worries of this life, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desire for other things come in and chokes the word, making it unfruitful. Those five words recorded in Mark 4:19 are quite intriguing, “the desire for other things.”

With just those five words Jesus catches everything outside of Himself and His word. Then Jesus goes on to complete the explanation of the sower saying, “Like seed sown on good soil, some people hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown” (Mark 4:20). Notice the correlation Jesus made between the seed, the word, people, life and becoming fruitful, *i.e.* productive, successful, effective, and prosperous and that fruitfulness depends on living according to God's word. Jesus was talking about discipleship.

Jesus said, “You are truly my disciple if you continue in my word” (John 8:31). So the next step is to learn the word of God. There is no way around it. It is the primary way through which God communicates with us. Hopefully, through the course of reading this entire book, you will come to understand that in talking about learning God's word orally through the stories that are in the Bible, we are not talking about a loose translation. The telling of a Bible story should be and must be true to the written text, not a paraphrase, not a summary, and not an individual's personal rendition of a story. We are talking about the written *logos* becoming the spoken living *rhema*. And once we decide to go in this direction of learning and living by God's word, we find that word is beyond anything we have ever known and can feed our spirit like we may not have expected.

Recently I was speaking to a group of young people in Texas, and told them the story of Jesus turning water into wine (John 2:1-12). Most people miss the beauty and meaning in this story because of their own predisposed thinking one way or the other regarding drinking wine. So to not let that happen, after telling the story, we entered into a time of discussing it.

I asked first, “What do we learn about Mary in this story?” As we questioned the story, the young people began to see that Mary was a woman of compassion who did not want any shame to come upon the wedding. And we saw she was a woman who was proactive and got involved in what needed to be done. Even though it was not her responsibility to provide the wine at the wedding, she went to Jesus. And what did Jesus say? “It is not my time.”

Then, I asked the class, “If it wasn’t Jesus’s time, whose time was it?”

“God’s?” came one halfhearted answer.

“Come on, think,” I said. “Consider the context. Where is this story taking place?”

“Cana.”

“What is going on?” “A wedding,” they all replied.

“So whose time was it?”

Suddenly the lights went on. It was the bride’s time, and the groom’s time. Yes, and Jesus is extremely sensitive to this not being His time, knowing that if He did a big high profile miracle, the wedding would be over and all the attention would come on Him and this was not His time. It was “their time” and Jesus was careful to maintain the integrity of the wedding. As a result, we see a beautiful side of Jesus’s character called discretion. Are there times, when, like Jesus, we don’t need to let our left hand know what our right hand is doing, but we simply do what is necessary without drawing any attention to ourselves?

The students were profoundly impacted as we had simply looked deeper into the story through asking questions. The authority of an oral story told from God’s word had suddenly taken on a new meaning they would carry with them from that day forward.

Disciple-making with God’s Word

If we are going to become a disciple, the question is will we allow this word of God to change our lives, to change our thinking, our speaking, our behavior, our vocabulary, our outlook toward other people, the things we look at, the things we don’t look at, the things we listen to, allowing the word of God to totally change and transform our life? This is what following Jesus is all about. This is what happened to the disciples.

In John 4 we read that Jesus met a woman at a well in Samaria. The Scripture says Jesus had to go through Samaria. Why did Jesus have to go through Samaria? No Jew ever went through Samaria. If they were going from Judea to Galilee as Jesus was, they would go from Jerusalem down to Jericho, cross the Jordan River and go up the river on the other side- away from Samaria. ALL this had to change. All this had to change. Most everything these men had been taught since the day they were born had to change. All their wrong thinking, their prejudices, their predisposed ideas had to change.

This is what embracing the authority of the word of God will bring to our life. This is what will happen when we begin to understand the stories in the word of God in their context, not in our denomination’s tradition, but in Biblical context.

Oral Bibles Indwelling the Word of God

It is much easier to learn the word of God through the narratives in the Bible than through trying to memorize verses of abstract propositional truths. The truths are good and are preached in every church and taught in every Bible school in the country. But they are abstract!

The result is a decline in Biblical literacy so that the general consensus in our culture is no longer based of the word of God.

Pastors typically come out of seminary preaching abstract propositional truths and as a result, the biblical literacy of the church has declined. The home groups many people attend quite often also work from a linear paradigm of propositional truths. The result is a decline in Biblical literacy so that the general consensus in

our culture is no longer based of the word of God and Christians find themselves more and more confused and on the defense.²⁸

An Oral Bible consists of 60-70 stories beginning from Genesis 1 and continuing chronologically through the Bible to Revelation, so that people can see and understand an overview of the whole biblical narrative. If you were to sit down and just read through all 60 to 70 stories, you could do so in about four hours. By simply reading the stories of an Oral Bible chronologically, you can begin to gain an understanding of the Bible. The key phrase there was, 'can begin.' You are not yet asking questions of each story as we did in the story of turning water into wine. But seeing an overview of God's word is pretty essential to come to really know God.

Then we can delve deeper into the stories. Many people in church today grew up studying the Bible in a purely literate fashion and often have a wrong understanding of what the Scripture was actually saying. For example, in the story of Jacob wrestling the angel of God in Genesis 32, many people in the church actually think Jacob won the wrestling match. They read the story but don't see what actually happened. A literate learning mode takes us from one action to the next in a fraction of a second, when in reality the sequence of actions could have taken minutes or hours or even days.

Because the fundamental nature of reading is linear we often don't stop or even slow down enough to analyze what we have just read. However, if we hear a story presented in an oral form that includes drama and more context than just reading gives us, we see a much more complete picture of what is happening and as a result we gain a deeper understanding of the spiritual truth in the Scriptures.

²⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live? How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Crossway 50th Anniversary edition, 2005).

Trusting the Holy Spirit to Use His Word

I sat on a concrete floor eating a very simple lunch with some Muslim farmers. As we finished our meal I said to my host, “Did you know that Jesus told a lot of stories about farmers?” He replied



incredulously “no” and so I said, “Yes would you like to hear one?” and I told the story of the sower.

All was well. The room was full of farmers so I told the story of the wheat and the tares and the end of the world. Well, they all liked it. There were a bunch of children in the room, so I told the story of Jonah getting eaten by the whale. I became animated and everyone was laughing and having a good time when the Holy Spirit said, “Tell the story of the prodigal son.” So I began telling the story of the prodigal son. Three quarters of the way through the story, my host began to weep. I finished the story and looked at him and asked, “What’s

“I realized these are not just stories, they are the word of God...”

happening?” He said, “I left home as a young man, just like the boy in this story, and I was gone for twenty years and I returned home with nothing just like the boy in this story. At this point I realized these are not just stories, they are the word of God

and they are quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and are a discerners of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the people in Thessalonica, “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess. 2:13 ESV). The oral word of God has the power to change our lives whether we are farmers or businessmen, Greeks or Americans.

The easiest and best way of understanding the word of God is through the narratives of the stories in both the Old and New Testaments. Whether people are literate or not, we can all understand stories.

We are not suggesting replacing print and ink word for word, line for line Bibles. However, oral methods give us an opportunity to internalize God’s word so that it becomes easier to share with others. In a very real way, what we master becomes our Oral Bible. You no longer need to go look it up because it has become part of us.

God’s Word is Changing Us

It is important that throughout history we see how God's word changed people and the world. Over and over again Peter bore witness to the resurrection as he did at Pentecost, and preached the same message in the Temple in Acts 3 after healing the lame man at the beautiful gate. The resurrection changed everything we knew about life on planet earth. Then at the Council at Jerusalem, Peter told the story of what took place at the house of a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, which helped set the gospel free from Jewish traditions.

Then Martin Luther put the authority of the word of God above the authority of the Church, and again the history of the world was changed. In 1630 when John Winthrop was the governor of Massachusetts, every home in Boston had a Bible and that Bible was being read on a daily basis. The people were trying with all of their hearts to live their lives according to the word of God. The Pilgrims understood, "Thy word is truth" (John 17:7) "So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples" (John 8:31 ESV). The dynamic key that the Pilgrims were using was "abiding." They were seriously in the Word every day. Oral disciples must also be in the Word every day.

We need disciples in the church today and we need disciple-makers. We are losing the younger generations because they don't know the Bible. They must understand that the same principles taught in the Bible apply to people's lives as much today as they did 2,000, 3,000, and 4,000 years ago.

Could we have a better chance of our young people learning the word of God by teaching it to them through the narratives that are in the Bible? Can they learn the stories? Can they tell the stories? Can they live the stories? Yes, they can.

Oral Bibles live inside each believer. And they emerge from our lips as the Holy Spirit prompts those in whom His Word dwells.

Discussion questions:

1. Describe an oral Bible in your own words. What is it not? How practical is an oral Bible?
2. What is the advantage of internalizing God's word for a follower of Jesus?
3. How can an oral Bible lead to others recognizing the authority of God in their lives?
4. As a group, list 60 to 70 Bible stories that you consider essential to knowing God and being a follower of Jesus. As you list the stories, identify at least one essential truth and one relevant issue that the story addresses in America today.
5. Describe how an oral Bible leads to spiritual development and not just becoming more knowledgeable of Bible facts.

Chapter 5: Training to be Reproducible

Regina Manley and Mark Snowden

In order to serve as a volunteer overseas, a Virginia high school senior had to learn 13 Bible stories and master five of them. Nearly three months later, her English teacher had assigned creation stories around the world. The biblical account was not included in the book. The teacher said, “I suppose to be fair if any of you know the version in the Bible, you may tell it to the class right now.” According to the senior, she sat straight up in her chair and out of her mouth came the story of “Creation, Adam & Eve, and the Fall.”

Note that the girl had no preparation time, no Bible handy to read, but had just been given an incredible opportunity. Her training had been reproducible not just for a two week trip, but whenever the Lord needed to use it in her everyday world.

No matter how greatly the Gospel impacts individuals or communities, birthing the Good News as a way of life in the next generation becomes the crux of its survival. Reproducibility is the birth channel of the Christian faith.

The Gospel message is communicated in American culture many ways. In this book, we have learned from Butch Vernon’s chapter that the American church faces many challenges. One of the most significant is that our Western, literate mindset places so much emphasis on ‘knowing’ that there is danger of thinking that ‘knowing’ the message is the same as ‘receiving’ it. But knowledge alone does not reproduce.

Reproducibility starts when the knowledge of the Good News moves from the head to the heart resulting in one pivotal decision to choose Christ. That decision in an individual heart is then followed by a life-long chain of similar decisions. God made us to be social beings. So it’s the truly changed individuals who impact family, friends, and communities, reproducing the Christ-filled life.

In his chapter, Mark Snowden described how applying oral strategies improved evangelism, discipleship, and church planting. In this chapter, we will examine some ways to “oralize” training in order to increase reproducibility. This includes incorporating narrative, discovery learning, contextualization, modeling and celebration. Then we will finish with suggestions on how to use some of these ideas with a small group and further resources available from the Internet.

Story-focused

Story-focused training is more reproducible because oral methods, particularly stories, are the primary way people gain and retain knowledge. Researchers Roger



Figure 10 Jim Manley leads a small group Bible study in which questions engage participants in dialogue in Nampa, Idaho.

Shank and Robert Adelson state, “Stories about one’s experiences and the experiences of others are the fundamental constituents of human memory, knowledge, and social communication.”²⁹

We all understand this intuitively because everyone enjoys a good story. Through stories we experience what is familiar, which confirms our understanding of the world. Through other stories we experience new ideas that challenge us and activate our imaginations to respond appropriately. We continually review and re-evaluate these narratives as we make choices each day. Is there a better story than the one we received? Is something in our experience not working that is held in our belief system? Why do we believe one storyteller and not another? What is our context for evaluating what is trustworthy and authority?

God has wired us for story. Brain research shows stories work as triggers to index memories in the listener. They are the structure of how we view the world. This makes “story” a significant memory retention tool.³⁰ The more we use biblical narratives, the higher the likelihood that training will be remembered and passed along to the glory of God.

Stories also give us clues about how to navigate the complex issues of our social

²⁹ Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, “Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story,” *Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), p. 1.

³⁰ Kendall Haven, *Story Proof: The Science behind the Starling Power of Story* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007).

lives. Jesus repeated the succinct command, “You shall love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:40 KJV). The story of the Good Samaritan grips our heart, inviting us to participate in the drama. It turns an abstract principle into a concrete example that we imagine, identify with, and apply to real life. We do not easily forget principles learned this way because stories so effectively bridge the chasm between the head and the heart.

Stories can explain doctrines that defy logic. Through the story of creation, God began to reveal His nature as both singular and plural. Jesus demonstrated that He was fully God and fully man. Where people struggle to memorize a few isolated scriptures that support these abstract concepts, stories flow.

Story-based training is also easier to remember. The tool of storytelling effectively engages both the intellect and the emotions, connects the present past and future and helps us makes sense of our challenging world.

Discovery Learning

Oral strategies place greater emphasis on learning in an interactive, social context in comparison to literate methods that require individual silent reading. Discovery learning is a key part of the process.

Discovery learning honors the idea that every participant comes with a wealth of life experiences and viable perspectives that benefit the group. Dialogue is essential. In oralized training everyone has a piece of the puzzle. There is both, respect for each individual's voice, as well as anticipation that the Holy Spirit can speak through any member of the group. This process is similar to the theory of constructivism where learners build personal interpretations of the world based on their experiences and interactions.³¹ It differs in that Christians recognize Jesus Christ is Truth, so knowledge is not relative to the context, but realized when applying kingdom principles to those contexts.

Oral strategies place greater emphasis on learning in an interactive, social context in comparison to literate methods that require individual silent reading.

Oral learners concern themselves with the practicality of truth more than its theory. They take ownership of their learning and want to work it out in their own lives, and within their community. Training should use open-ended questions more than questions with specific answers and fostered critical thinking. Facilitated will be more frequent than instruction. Small groups and pair sharing will increase opportunities for each to process and practice new ideas and skills.

³¹ Jean Lave, “The Practice of Learning,” *Contemporary Theories of Learning: Learning Theorists in Their Own Words* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 200-208



Figure 11 An impromptu skit can involve members in not only learning the story, but "living" in the story.

Contextualizing

Oralized training means to be responsive to the unique mix of individuals that make up a group. It is learner-centered. This means there is flexibility in the training process to adapt to the group. We call this contextualizing the learning environment. For example, training with the younger generation may use more technology. Training with an immigrant group to America, on the other hand, might require bicultural individuals to bring awareness of cultural norms hidden from outsiders.

Jay Moon's chapter analyzes the increasing oral preferences of today's students, particularly Millennials. A missionary axiom is "What is caught is taught." If the students catch it in a method that engages them, they'll more easily reproduce it beyond the classroom.

An ideal way to contextualize training is to provide opportunities for creative expression through the arts. When participants demonstrate principles learned through song, dance, drawing or drama, it is often the most memorable exercise of the entire event.

Modeling and practice

We teach the same way we were taught. Familiarity with formal schooling methods can make "oralizing" training a challenge. So it is important to evaluate how training is modeled. Are the class demonstrations the same as what future practice should look like? Sometimes a model is simple but the training process is complex. It may be difficult to replicate due to schedule, cost, and number of trainers required. This

can cripple reproducibility.

Practice is essential. Educators know that increasing the number sensory inputs in the learning process helps us to remember and that applying what we have learned or explaining it to others dramatically increases retentions. God gave us five senses to help us learn. Shouldn't we use sight, touch, smell, taste, as well as hearing for success? Most training time should be dedicated to the participants' engagement in learning tasks that lead to mastering and communicating the new skills. People reproduce only what they remember and put into practice.

Jerry Wiles' team from Living Water International has conducted hundreds of orality workshops. They present a Bible story several times, interspersing each presentation with dialog and discussion. Then small groups of attendees continue repeating and sharing more discussion. At the end of a 1-day workshop, most participants are able to share 3 or more Bible stories and can facilitate discussion. Trainers who work in pairs are equipped in the 2-day workshops. Their maxim is, "Teach a little. Practice a lot. Implement immediately."

Todd Holiday is involved heavily in missions at The Chapel (2,300 attending) in Fort Wayne, Ind. He testifies to the effectiveness of this training principle. Chapel members that attended the workshops enthusiastically incorporate storytelling and discussion into many of the church's ministries such as mission trips, Vacation Bible Schools, park outreaches, retreats, nursing home visits and crisis counseling. In addition, many members use storytelling for one-on-one witnessing. Holiday reported that in three short years Bible storytelling has become "part of the DNA of The Chapel."³²

Celebration

Oralized training makes room for celebration. Participants learn and are given positive reinforcement, even rewards or recognition, when responding. It emphasizes learning together in a positive atmosphere where people feel safe to express their ideas and to practice new skills. Of course, there will be challenges and difficult moments, but trainers take time to acknowledge the victories of what has been learned. Paul Koehler, who has trained hundreds of church planters in Mexico, India and Africa, says that celebration is so important that it is now a component of nearly 80% of his training program.³³

Celebration can be interspersed throughout the training. It may be especially appropriate near the end. The StoryRunners ministry (Cru) finishes their weeklong story-crafting workshop with a complete presentation of all 14 Bible stories that the group composed during the training.

Increasing the use of narrative, discovery learning, contextualization, modeling,

³² Manley telephone conference call with Todd Holiday on January 21 and January 22, 2016

³³ Manley telephone interview with Paul and Teresa Koehler on October 6, 2015

practice and celebration in training often requires decreasing content. For those accustomed to lecturing and using handouts and books, this essential change feels like a call to sacrifice their Isaac. But trainers who have experienced fully engaged participants that actually practice what they learn quickly adapt to this change.

In Snowden's small group, a Catholic woman got into the habit of telling her co-worker a new Bible story each week. The co-worker, who was actually a Jewish rabbi, prompted this woman every week to get another Bible story from her. When the woman learned a Bible story, she knew that she would be required to tell it at work the next day. And with the man's knowledge, especially of Old Testament stories, she wanted to be as accurate as possible. Snowden said, "As we got into stories from the Gospel, it was fascinating to me to know how God was reproducing His Word in the lives of these two people."

Applying oral strategies to training increases reproducibility because learners participate fully. Narrative connects head and heart, cements memory and reveals profound truths. Discovery learning allows participants to own their learning. It also integrates the new knowledge with their past experience. Contextualized training is most relevant to their everyday lives. Modeling and practice build confidence. Celebration turns events into expressions of joy.



Figure 12 Bible Storytelling and Discussion workshop at Mission Aviation Fellowship (MAF) headquarters in Idaho.

Making Bible Studies Memorable

In Jesus' day, people couldn't easily go look up Scripture. Scrolls were kept in clay jars and used carefully. While students, boys memorized the handwritten text on scrolls that were available to them. Scripture was read in synagogues and the Temple. Any reproducibility had to rely on what was learned. Given the need for reproducibility, it is no mystery then why the Lord made sure that 75% of the Old and New Testament was prose – wrenching histories, thought-prodding parables, pithy idioms and memorable poetry.

Imagine the typical Bible study class. Most students are literate. They “sit and get” during lectures focused on Bible verses that are often disconnected from their context, but shore up an argument the teacher tries to make. Then the students walk out to “sit and get” some more in a highly literate sermon. Contrast a small group that values reproducibility. At the heart of the lesson and sermon is the need to make disciples who can pass the teaching along. Paul had this in mind when he told Timothy to “entrust to reliable men who could teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2 HCSB).

Snowden develops curriculum for postmodern Americans. He builds each lesson with reproducibility in mind. Can the participants lead a lesson during the coming week at work, after a ballgame, in a mother’s day-out program, family devotions, spontaneously in a spiritual conversation?

Here are the seven elements Snowden includes in each lesson to encourage learning that can be accurately reproduced during the coming week.³⁴

1. **IN ADVANCE:** A heads-up on anything the facilitator needs ahead of time and usually includes a related activity that fosters a learning environment by engaging two or more sensory learning gates.
2. **REVIEW:** The checkpoint for learning the previous session’s story and then holding participants accountable for any commitments they made.
3. **GETTING READY:** The context for the Bible story, the background, and a few questions that will have participants listening carefully.
4. **STORY:** Scripture reference and title for a Bible story. A suggested “told” story transcript is often included. Composite stories are always provided as an example.
5. **STUDY TIME:** Dialogue is seamlessly conveyed in three sections:
 - a. **Head** – learning the story to the point that each participant can remember it and reproduce it in the real world.
 - b. **Heart** – wrestling with the Bible truths and applying it to real life.
 - c. **Hands** – implementation and holding members accountable for spiritual growth. The leader has a listening task to ensure participants are doing what they commit to do.



Figure 13 Matt Gaston uses Bible Storying curriculum with his church in Show Low, Ariz.

³⁴ Mark Snowden, “TruthSticks Learning Guide,” March to May 2016, Snowden Ministries International, p. 4

6. **MEMORY VERSE:** Most sessions encourage memorizing verbatim Bible verses that are usually related to the theme for the cycle or that session's Bible story.
7. **PLANNING:** Groups are prompted to stay on course with Bible truths for making disciple-makers.

Another resource for learning Bible storytelling and discussion skills is the StoryFire® series authored by Regina Manley and produced by MAF—Mission Aviation Fellowship. This series consists of twenty-five short audio lessons and four distinct storying model videos available on line for free download at www.maf.org/storyfire.

Telling all the stories in the Bible is great for godly information. However, the emphasis in reproducibility is to internalize Scripture. Rick Leatherwood's chapter on Oral Bibles speaks to internalizing God's word for ourselves and then obey it. Training that is reproducible is an excellent goal for modeling desired behavior. Seeing what is learned passed along to others can be used of the Holy Spirit to bring life change, churchwide revival, and ultimately community transformation through spiritual awakening.

Discussion questions:

1. What are some of the ways training, both formal and informal, can be "oralized" to increase reproducibility?
2. Which of these oral strategies can you apply to your teaching, training or discipling to give participants more opportunities to actively participate?
3. Recall training experiences, formal or informal, that positively impacted your life. Which elements of oralized training were part of the process?
4. Where does your current training process engage the participants in story? In discovery learning? In finding relevance to their context? In modeling and practice? In celebration and creative expression?
5. Evaluate examples you have observed where the Christ-filled life is reproducing. What oral strategies were in effect? How were these related to other effective key elements?
6. Examine Bible-based training in which you are currently involved. Create two columns. In the left column put PRESENT TRAINING and in the other column write ORALITY-BASED TRAINING. Then put on your reproducibility goggles. Write elements of each training session and content that is able to be reproduced in the real world, beyond an individual learner.
7. What is the most important reason why you would want to reproduce what you learn about the Lord and His ways?
8. In a group setting, pick any Bible story at random and without reviewing it at all, act out the story as an impromptu drama. How accurate were you? What would it take to become an accurate Bible storryer?

Chapter 6: Secondary Orality among Americans³⁵

Dr. W. Jay Moon

We stepped through the heavy doors of the university library, out of the cold and into the calming quiet of a place filled with pages of wisdom, students studying, and charming history. I searched for a reference desk or computer station. Instead, we spotted a small antique card catalog, tucked away in the corner like a forgotten toy of a past childhood. A small placard rested on top of the table, describing how students once used this to gather information about books. Puzzled, my son asked me how this worked. It struck me how vastly different students from this generation received and processed information from when I was a university student.

In this chapter, I will sketch a change in learning preference that has occurred in recent years among American students. I will then describe the learning process known as secondary oral or digit-oral learning. Finally, I will conclude with implications for those attempting to communicate with digit-oral learners in the U.S.

Learning Preference Change

In the 1980s, Walter Ong³⁶ observed that the learning preference of Western people was changing because of technological advances, such as television, radio, movies and other media. He first identified this trend as a secondary oral learning preference, since this learning preference is secondary (*i.e.*, coming after) the literacy process. Ong noted that people could read and write, but that many preferred to learn or process information by oral rather than by printed materials.³⁷

Whereas previous generations assumed that print-based means of learning were the best way to transform students, contemporary students prefer to learn through oral means, aided by various digital media sources. More recently, Jonah Sachs observed that contemporary learners are now accessing information through digital means to the extent that they exhibit the characteristics of oral learners (as opposed to print learning characteristics). As a result, he described these secondary oral learners using the term “digital,” as follows:

³⁵ Excerpts from the following publication by the author were used in this chapter: W. Jay Moon, “Re-Wiring the Brain: Theological Education among Oral Learners,” in *Reflecting on and Equipping for Christian Mission*. Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, Vol. 27. S. Bevans, T. Chai, J. Jennings, eds. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

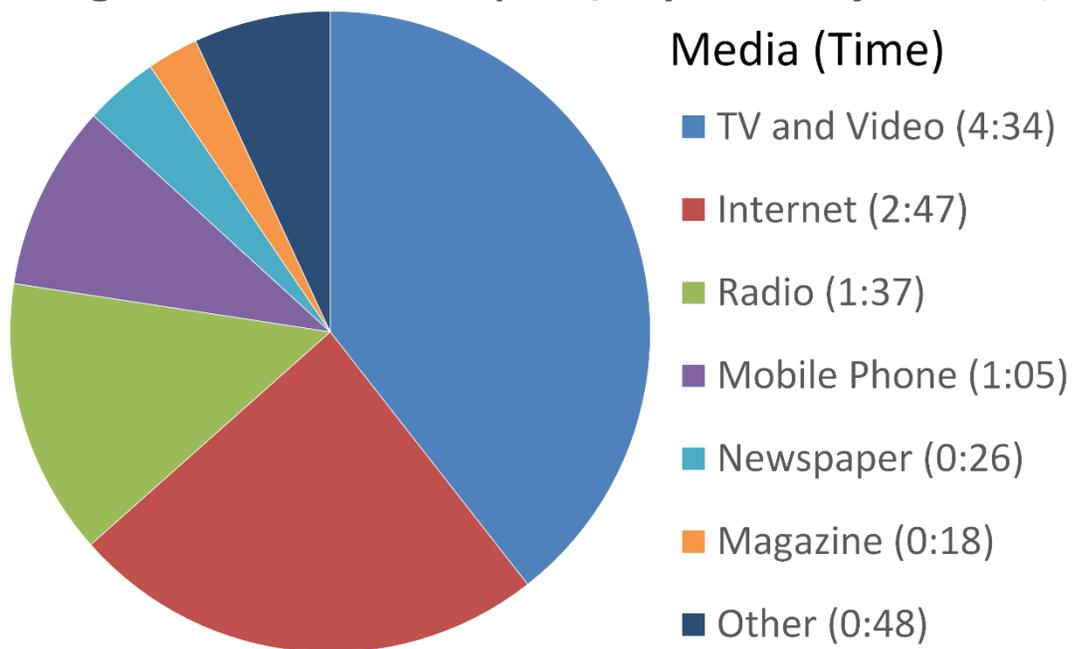
³⁶ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, (London, UK: Routledge, 1982).

³⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 63–64.

The oral tradition that dominated human experience for all but the last few hundred years is returning with a vengeance. It's a monumental, epoch-making, totally unforeseen turn of events . . . our new digital culture of information sharing has so rejected the broadcast style and embraced key elements of oral traditions, that we might meaningfully call whatever's coming next the *digital era*.³⁸

While some have called this learning preference the twenty-first-century literacy,³⁹ the roots of this learning preference originate in an oral learning preference that is fostered by digital technology. For example, when I asked students if they would rather read an article about William Wilberforce or watch a movie about him, they almost always choose the movie. Media technology then often draws people toward digital media sources, which affect how they prefer to learn. A 2011 study⁴⁰ indicated how U.S. adults access various media platforms as follows:

Average Time U.S. Adults spend/day with Major Media, 2012



³⁸ Jonah Sachs, *Winning the Story Wars: Why Those Who Tell (and Live) the Best Stories Will Rule the Future* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2012).

³⁹ NMC, "A Global Imperative: The Report of the 21st Century Literacy Summit," 2005. <http://www.adobe.com/education/pdf/globalimperative.pdf>.

⁴⁰ "TV, Mobile See Gains in Viewing Time: U.S. adults spend more time with mobile than print magazines and newspapers combined", Dec. 12, 2011 in: <http://www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?R=1008728>. Accessed on 12/23/2105. For additional statistics on media usage in American homes, see: <http://www.frankwbaker.com/mediause.htm>

This data indicates that the amount of time that most American adults spend daily reading is minor compared to the time that they are receiving messages from digital sources.

I decided to test this a bit further with U.S. seminary students that were in my courses to see if this exposure to digital media sources was affecting how they preferred to learn. These students represented the future pastors, missionaries, and church leaders and I wanted to assess whether they were oral or print preference learners. I conducted a test over a period of nine years⁴¹, using a Learning Preference Assessment (LPA)⁴² instrument. The LPA was based on Ong's work on orality, and this instrument assessed if a person preferred to learn through oral or print means. While most people utilized both oral and print materials, the LPA assessed which one they tended to use most frequently to learn and be transformed. The LPA results from the students revealed the following:

- 54 percent of the 281 students tested exhibited an oral learning preference. Keep in mind that these are graduate students at accredited theological institutions. After over 16 years of schooling, the majority still preferred to learn through oral means!
- The percentage of oral learners went from 42 percent to 62 percent over the nine-year span, predicting that this learning preference was on the rise in U.S. seminaries.
- When I tested 32 undergraduate students at LeTourneau University who majored in theology and religion (*i.e.*, this represented a future incoming seminary class room), a whopping 78% tested as oral learners, which indicated that this learning preference change was not going away any time soon.

These results suggested that the discussion of orality in the U.S. was not limited to simply children or less educated folks; rather, it even applied to a highly literate digit-oral generation.⁴³

Learning Process Change

So, what does this digit-oral learning process look like? Due to the ubiquity of digital means to gather information, people are changing how they receive, reason

⁴¹ Moon, "I Love to Learn But I Don't Like to Read: The Rise of Secondary Oral Learning." *Orality Journal* 2, no. 2 (2013): 55–65.

⁴² Abney, "Orality Assessment Tool," 2001. <http://orality.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Orality-Assessment-Tool-Worksheet.pdf>, cited 4-11-16.

⁴³ This is described further, along with suggestions for educators in digit-oral contexts in: Moon, "Understanding Oral Learners." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 15, no. 1 (January 2012): 29–39.

through, remember, and then recreate messages. This change in the learning process from print to digit-oral learners is summarized in the following Table 1:

Process	Print	Oral
<i>Receive message</i>	Words carry meaning; therefore, the teacher carefully prepares and reads words.	Mental images, symbols, gestures carry meaning; therefore, the teacher paints mental pictures and creates an experience.
<i>Reason through message</i>	Learners take notes on main points, principles, and definitions.	Learners see self & participate in metaphors, mental pictures in dialogue with others.
<i>Remember message</i>	Learners review notes, written handouts.	Learners review mnemonic devices (music, proverb, story, symbol, ritual, drama, and dance).
<i>Recreate message</i>	New teacher refers to written outline or manuscript.	New teacher guides a journey using a storyboard, Memory palace, “chunking” information.

Table 1. Print vs. Oral learning preference

I first observed the differences in print vs. oral learning **preferences** as a missionary among the Builsa people in Ghana, West Africa. As the kerosene lantern cast long shadows on the mud walls of the church one night, I presented a message to this eager group of new believers who were preparing for baptism. I carefully prepared a three-point outline about salvation with adequate definitions to explain the important concepts. In a short period of time, though, I noticed their eyes drooping as they gradually started to nod off to sleep. Fortunately, a local church leader asked if he could help. I stepped aside as he came to the front and presented the same material, but he used a different approach. He first shared a local proverb to explain the concept in very earthy terms that was also memorable. The audience joined in a song to emphasize certain aspects, followed by a story from the Bible and his own life. As he painted these

mental pictures for them, the audience became alive! The listeners participated in this event, as they particularly could see themselves in the struggles of life. I was amazed to discover this oral learning preference⁴⁴.

After returning from Africa, I taught in the U.S. seminary classroom. Over a nine-year period, I noticed that the students' learning preference was becoming more similar to the Builsa oral learning patterns than the print learning patterns with which I grew up. Due to the heavy use of digital media, today's seminary students are now exhibiting an oral preference for images and symbols to communicate instead of three point outlines. They prefer to learn through discussions. Mental pictures draw them into the learning experience so that they want to learn more. Oral genres are highly favored over print methods such that they lean into symbols, rituals, stories, short pithy sayings, music, drama, etc. The more that I used the oral learning approaches that I learned in Africa, the more the students were able to receive, process, remember, and recreate the material.

Due to the heavy use of digital media, today's seminary students are now exhibiting an oral preference for images and symbols to communicate instead of three point outlines.

Implications for communicating with digit-oral learners:

To create learning experiences for digit-oral learners, I had to change the way I communicated. If print learning patterns alone were used to communicate with the millennial generation, for example, there will be miscommunication (at best) or withdrawal and leaving (at worst).

After taking the LPA assessment described above, one seminary student emailed the following message,

In my ministry, I feel that I am very logical about how I preach, and that is very helpful to some. However, I do realize that I do miss some of the oral learners by not providing some of the oral art that helps transmit the message. That is where I struggle in my preaching. I find it more difficult to paint word pictures than anything else in writing my sermons. I have no problem coming up with the logical flow of the sermon, but it is the things that oral learners need that I am lacking in.

The orality discussion helped to articulate for this pastor what he was observing in his church. He was not connecting with the oral learners in his church due to his reliance upon print learning preferences alone. To help pastors or others to communicate with

⁴⁴ For further information, see: Moon, W. Jay. "Discipling through the Eyes of Oral Learners." *Missiology* 38, no. 2 (2010): 127-40.

digit-oral learners, the acronym C.H.I.M.E.S. provides helpful questions to consider when designing learning experiences, as follows:

- a. **Communal:** How can you encourage the group to learn from each other? Consider ways to foster personal discussion/interaction, small group discussions, panels, visits, rituals, etc.
- b. **Holistic:** How can you connect what they are learning to other areas of life so that you are adding onto and critiquing what they already know? Consider relating to relevant cultural events/people that help people connect to their ordinary life struggles.
- c. **Images:** What images, symbols, and concrete/relational object lessons can be used so that words are not the only communicator of meaning? Consider the use of metaphors, mental images, relevant gestures, video clips, and pictures with no or few words on the pictures.
- d. **Mnemonics:** What formulaic devices, genres, repetition, etc., can you use to “hook” the audience and then form memory “triggers” for later recall? Consider the use of short, pithy phrases/proverbs. Also consider oral art such as story, music, dance, and drama.
- e. **Experiential:** How can learners experience something, particularly events associated with real struggles of life, instead of simply learning at a distance? Consider question/response, and meaningful rituals that are created or contextualized to address relevant life issues⁴⁵.
- f. **Sensory:** How can the senses be engaged to encourage deep learning? Consider the use of symbols to help people connect the senses with an ideology to foster deep learning.⁴⁶

***The acronym
C.H.I.M.E.S.
provides helpful
questions to consider
when designing
learning
experiences.***

To prepare a teaching experience that will connect with oral learners, I developed the following chart to check that I am adapting my communication approach to match the digit-oral learning preference. I have used this for preparing various teaching experiences (*e.g.*, small groups, preaching, discipleship, class room learning, etc.).

⁴⁵ For a further discussion on the use of meaningful rituals for discipleship in oral cultures, see: Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1997)..

⁴⁶ For a further discussion on the powerful use of symbols in traditional oral cultures, see: Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1969).

ASPECT	OCCURRENCE	NO.	WT.	SCORE
Communal	Talk with someone		X 1	
	Invite to a small group		X 3	
	Participate in a small group discussion		X 5	
Holistic	Connect to relevant cultural events/people		X 1	
	Relate to ordinary life struggles		X 1	
Images	Pictures without words		X 2	
	Pictures with words		X 1	
	> one sentence projected without pictures		X -1	
	Concrete/Relational Object lesson		X 2	
	Abstract principles/definitions		X -2	
	Video clip		X 5	
	Mental images/metaphors		X 1	
	Symbols		X 2	
Mnemonics	Free use of relevant gestures		X 1	
	Short, pithy phrase/proverb		X 2	
	Oral genres: story, music, dance, drama		X 3	
Experiential	Repetition (same thing in different ways)		X 2	
	Ritual		X 3	
Sensory	Audience Participation		X 3	
	Taste/Smell/Touch something		X 3	
TOTAL				

While I do not recommend that this table controls or inhibits the teacher, I have found this to be a helpful chart to review before and after preparing to teach digit-oral learners. I simply tally the number of occurrences, multiply this by the number of points for the occurrence, and then total the final score. For me, a score ≥ 50 often results in a very digit-oral experience while a score below 30 is often more suitable for a print preference audience.

Conclusion

Standing next to the card catalogue that was collecting dust, I asked my son who attended this university, “Do you know anyone here that loves to learn but just doesn’t like to read?”

With a quick laugh and broad smile, he quickly retorted, “That is all of us!”

It was obvious to him that there were other means to gather information than simply printed materials. The technological changes observed by Ong in the 1980s have resulted in a full-scale explosion at the turn of the 21st century with the advent of the Internet. The digital natives that now prefer to learn via digit-oral means have changed

the way that they receive, reason through, remember, and recreate messages. Wise communicators will adapt to the preferences of the audience that they are trying to reach instead of hoping that they will become the audience that we want them to be. Change is not only possible - it is imperative; otherwise, we will be standing next to the card catalogue wondering why people aren't learning like they used to.

Discussion questions:

1. Explain the digit-oral learning preference in your own words: Why is understanding the digit-oral learning preference important?
2. Examine the pie chart that displayed time spent with media every day. Identify how much time (in minutes) that you spend with these media. What does the pie chart tell us about the ways people prefer to communicate and process information?
 - ___ Television and video
 - ___ Internet
 - ___ Radio
 - ___ Mobile devices
 - ___ Newspaper
 - ___ Magazine
 - ___ Other:
3. In a group setting, discuss changes in daily media use and how that has impacted how you choose to learn.
4. Identify how much time you spend with the Bible every day. How does your use of the Bible in printed or digital formats compare with other media every day?
5. Examine pros and cons for engaging oral learners in intentional disciple-making. Review the Print vs. Oral grid for communication processes to help inform your responses.
6. Review the acronym C.H.I.M.E.S. Identify the score your church's worship and Bible study experiences would rate using the scale. Would it be over 50 or under 30?
7. How would your church's worship experiences and small group discipleship change if a CHIMES score of over 50 was to be reached?
8. Why do most churches in the USA need to rethink the ways they communicate the gospel and make disciples?

Chapter 7: Caring Enough to Communicate Orally

Charles Madinger

My heart goes out to missions committees, mission pastors and others who bear the responsibility of allocating the financial and human resources to support kingdom work around the world. I sat in that chair for a while and heard some amazing stories of success (few failures to learn from), and witnessed the modern emergence of oral strategies for oral preference peoples.

It's not rocket science. People living in oral tradition cultures prefer narrative, song, dance, drumming, etc., and require ways and means of communication that best help them receive, process, remember and pass on important truths and information. And it doesn't just apply to those of us in Christian mission. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been using those ways and means for decades to educate least developed countries in famine relief, HIV/AIDS, malaria, polio eradication, civic education and a host of other global crises. The following two examples represent the nuggets panned from a stream that flows out of a gold mine. They do not represent "secular" communication projects. They simply need to reach oral preference learners with life-saving, life-changing information in ways that they can most easily receive, process, remember and pass on that information.

Crisis Response Messages

A U.S. government agency recently did a communication study in partnership with the University of Kentucky. It looked at what might happen in the event of a major city water contamination that required people to stop using the water. This is no hypothetical terrorist scenario. We've already witnessed it in places like western Pennsylvania – fracking practices that pollute underground drinking water sources; West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee with coal sludge pools spilling over into public water sources, and Portland's reservoir contamination. In all these cases, a public announcement called for everyone to stop using the water for drinking, cooking and even bathing or feeding to animals.

Once this kind of cessation message goes out and the local authorities have cleaned up the water to "safe levels for human consumption," how do you get people, the city, or region to trust the message that the water is safe? What sources of information do people trust? Where would they go to find that information? What would make them confident enough to start drinking the water again? After convening a panel of experts ranging from water and sanitation, educators, public officers and community leaders,

we realized there were major populations that culturally required an orality-framed culture-specific strategy.

We gathered focus groups among refugee and immigrant communities residing in Lexington and Louisville, and found without exception these groups wanted things not only in their own languages, but from people within their own group – not in print, but orally. The initial information could come through mass media, but parents emphatically made the point they wanted the “collective media” of school meetings attended by their children to authenticate the messages. The words to describe the message could not contain the normal jargon, “safe levels for human consumption,” but terms they understood and could relate to from their countries of origin.

We’ll have to re-tool ourselves to express messages...to satisfy the needs of oral preference learners.

The United States population grows exponentially simply by virtue of accelerating immigration and diaspora birth rates. That means we are already behind the learning curve on reaching the unreached peoples in our own back yard. Now is the time to implement what we learned about designing our teaching and communication strategies around the world. The

American church generally believes everyone should be like us, talk like us and see the world as we see it. We’ll have to re-tool ourselves to express messages in stories, music and other art forms as the medium and not just the illustrations or supplemental bones we throw out to satisfy the needs of oral preference learners. Propositional sermons must give way to narrative, and the sharing of the gospel through audience relevant Bible stories, poetry, prayers, etc., and shelve our Laws, Bridges and Roads when the context requires more orality-sensitive ways and means.

Type II Diabetes Education

Eastern Kentucky represents one of the oldest cultures in the US. The Scotch and Irish settlers in Appalachian Mountains survived geographic isolation from the other colonies, territories and eventual states, and did so by their fierce loyalty to family (clans) and would eventually supply the railroads and houses with coal. Outsiders could not be trusted. You learned everything you needed to know orally. It produced a unique genre of music (bluegrass) that sprouted out of its Irish heritage.

Unfortunately, the lack of tillable land and the servitude to coal magnates plunged the region into an economic and educational poverty. It now represents one of the largest populations of prescription drug addition, smoking rates, obesity and, unfortunately the resultant Type II Adult Onset Diabetes.

The number one selling drink in the region? Mountain Dew – the mega sugar and caffeine toxin that sets the pancreas on a fast track to obesity and diabetes. The typical regional diet consists of high fat, low fiber, and useless carbohydrates. Numerous government programs attempt to stem the tide, but so far show limited success. One

funded program spent \$50,000 to produce an Appalachian Cookbook for replacing ingredients and cooking methods handed down for untold generations.

In the process of drafting a proposal, we learned that the problem is not really dietary, it's social. If you're the granny that cooks fried chicken for the church potluck, that "greaseless tasting chicken" is your identity. Her entire family has to change their eating habits if she is to successfully manage her diabetes or obesity. Schools may ban the sugar-laden soft drinks, but that doesn't stop children from loading up a daily supply in their backpacks.

The only social behavior change communication strategy that can successfully slow the epidemic comes with an orality framework. It's culturally sensitive, using vernacular terms, dialects, testified to by respected locally recognized gatekeepers, sung by balladeers, and telling real life stories.

Making the Good News *Good* News

These two case studies reinforce the principle that oral peoples require oral ways and means of communication to make the deepest impact. They also make it clear that the world is dying for a lack of information and truth, and we alone can speak the whole truth to the whole American mosaic's needs. Who are our oral preference learners?

Native Americans, African Americans, Congolese refugees, Haitian immigrants, undocumented workers, "digital"/digital natives, hearing impaired, blind, others ranging from illiterate to functionally non-literate, and a plethora of others.

Jesus made one of His last stands in the temple courts (John 14). He reminded unbelievers of the truths they heard from Him and saw demonstrated, and then gave this parting revelation: My message is not My own. It comes from My Father. He commanded Me what to say and *how* to say it. His "what to say" was the message of the kingdom applied to local contexts. His "how to say it" came in the stories, parables, proverbs, symbols, rituals, and even hymns sung with his disciples as they left for Gethsemane.

The world is dying for a lack of information and truth, and we alone can speak the whole truth to the whole American mosaic's needs.

Discussion questions:

1. Who are the oral preference learners within hearing distance of you? Who are the immigrants, refugees and other diaspora groups? What are their networks? Who are the gatekeepers to those groups? When and where do they naturally and normally gather? (Hint: usually NOT on Sunday mornings!)
2. What curricula do we use that is designed and published by non-oral preference learners and how might we revise it? How do our oral learners receive, process remember and pass on information?
3. How can we build their trust through seeking their input on defining their problems and creating solutions? What are the Bible narratives that answer the questions with which they struggle? Which best speak into their culture and worldview (not ours).
4. Who are the poor, oppressed, and forgotten people only a few minutes from your havens? Who are their heroes, their self-beliefs, and their determination of what is “right and wrong, good and evil, and hope of redemption?”

Pray:

- Take one of the groups mentioned above and create a daily new media prayer guide.
- If you can discover the identity of gatekeepers, pray specifically for God to go before you and for opportunities to include them in addressing their most pressing needs on their terms.

Share: Regularly post some things on your new media channels (from Facebook to the next innovations) to promote the cause of caring for the groups you’ve identified. Make it a call to compassion, prayer and serving their needs.



Chapter 8: Orality Methods - Best Practices

This chapter is a collection of experiences and ideas provided by orality practitioners in the United States. Any “best practice” is much like Research and Development. We have provided examples that worked and worked well.

Orality among Seattle’s Millennials

Ministry to a church is not easy for a church planter. There’s more than sermon prep at stake. Oral methods work well to assist the church planter not only save time, but express care for those he serves.

Jared Burwell is a church planting pastor. He started NewStory Communities. This church, located in urban Seattle, is full of Millennials who have many children. He said, “I’m a bivocational pastor, which means I don’t have time to do sermon preparation for 20 hours. Storying allows me to handle the text responsibly, but with less preparation time. Also, since it is an easy method to learn, I have been able to give many other people in the church the chance to lead on Sunday. They see what I do and are able to duplicate it. Another interesting dynamic is that we don’t have a separate children’s church or Sunday school. Essentially, we are a one-room schoolhouse on Sunday morning. With a little bit of creative thought, we have been able to piece activity sheets, coloring pages, and interactive assignments together for the kids so they have extra tools to stay engaged while listening to the story. It has been a cheap, easy, and reproducible way to engage a large age range without having to buy multiple curricula or dividing our small church into tiny classes. We see storying bridge gaps not only between age ranges, but across ethnic and cultural differences as well. It seems to work among the urban population in which we are situated.”⁴⁷

Evangelizing: Getting Started

Caesar Kalinowski moved to the Pacific Northwest to start Soma Church using a storying model. “In the Pacific Northwest, where it’s much like Europe, sometimes you have post-Christian people. The café culture is cynical, fairly young, and fairly educated,” he says. Caesar began by going to a café owner and suggesting they do a “story night.” Anyone could tell any story he or she wanted, and some stories were pretty raunchy. However, Caesar, as the host, would listen for a theme from their stories and end by telling a Bible story that spoke to the issue others had raised. The patrons would listen intently and then afterwards individuals would come up and talk to him, and he

⁴⁷ Mark Snowden interview via email with Jared Burwell, 11-23-15

would invite them to one of his storytelling groups. The church now has forty groups telling Bible stories to address the problems of life the people are facing.⁴⁸

Engaging “Everyone” by Ray Neu

For those who grew up in church learning the basic Bible stories, just the mention of hearing a Bible story brings back memories of those early times. In general, this imprinted memory causes us to think of Bible stories as something ‘good for children.’ Over the last several years I’ve been telling those same Bible stories to adults in churches and homes across America thousands of times. It has been a special delight to watch them discover that those ‘same old stories’ are actually amazingly full of life!

What causes this turnaround in discovery? I suggest that there are two applications and three factors working together. The two applications are the two roles of story teller and facilitator.

1. When telling the Bible story, I tell it well. It’s as if it just happened last week and I was a witness to all that occurred. I use everything in me, my voice, my hands, my body language, expressions, eye contact, energy and excitement. The story comes alive again!
2. The second role I function in is as a facilitator. After the story and some creative reviews, I lead the group through an inductive discovery *into* the story. There is no lecture involved at all. Through open-ended questions, the group become the teachers as they examine the characters, actions, words, reactions, expectations and surprises found in the story.

Sincere joy is expressed as people realize that they are actually discovering truths in the story themselves, without being *told* by a teacher. As they collaborate together in this process, energy builds in the group. I often share that when these stories first occurred, they happened to *real* people, in a *real* place, at a *real* time in history and those people...did *not* know the end of the story! What does that mean? That means that for them, their emotions and reactions were very real. Many of us have lost contact with that part of the story because the stories have become two dimensional - flat characters on a flat page. By encouraging others to ‘walk into the story,’ look to their right, look to their left, see, hear, feel, think about and sometimes even smell the story, their senses begin to awaken.



Figure 14 Oral methods blur generational gaps as Bible stories become part of the conversation rather than dropping in disconnected Scripture verses. Photo from a training event in Cape Girardeau, Mo.

⁴⁸ Willis, 157.

That is the first factor, really *listening to the story*. Breathing life back into it by recalling that these were real people, just like us. The second factor is *listening to each other*. Collaborative discovery can be a fascinating venture. It's as if they are all looking at the same piece of art from different angles. One person builds off the first person's discovery while another sees a whole new viewpoint for the first time ever. These discoveries become more personal as people engage with different characters in the story. This is the practice of *listening to the Spirit*, revealing areas that need the attention of friends within the group. This form of story discovery is a reversed expression of our motto, as people share, others care, which naturally leads to prayer.



Contact Ray at www.bibletrekking.org, <http://nazarene.org/tellthestory>, and www.t4global.org.

Church Plant Grows Through Oral Approach

God took Mike Booth out of Oklahoma's oilfields and after pastoring 21 years, left his church in early 2014 to start a new one using Bible Storying methods. They began with one small group, but in a few months grew to three groups.

"In September we began three Bible storying groups meeting in homes that we call OIKOS groups," Booth said. "Each week we learn a Bible story and then challenge everyone to retell it to someone during the week. That is one of the major differences between Bible Storying and Bible studies. Bible stories are easier to retell and people feel more confident about sharing a Bible story. And they are God's Word."

After reading *Truth That Sticks* by Avery Willis and Mark Snowden and *Real Life Discipleship* by Jim Putman, Booth attended a TruthSticks Training workshop to learn orality methods. That next Sunday after visiting another church, he realized he couldn't remember the pastor's sermon outline, but he could still remember Bible stories he learned from Snowden at the training.

Booth and those at Rizen a Disciple-making Fellowship are actively sharing Christ in Oklahoma City. "During the eight-hour [TruthSticks] training God gave us a new vision of communicating the Gospel. Since Mother's Day, I have probably told the Four Faithful Friends story a hundred times and the response has been tremendously positive. One man who doesn't attend church said to me after I told him that story, 'That's the way I would think Jesus Himself would talk to me.' That's one of the best compliments I have ever received in sharing Jesus Christ!"

Booth said that a church planter friend was surprised that after 21 years preaching that he and his wife were opening up their home to neighbors and telling them Bible stories. Booth said, "To be honest with you, I find it a little bit hard to believe, too. But



as long as God will allow us, we at RIZEN are going to keep on telling Bible stories not only in our OIKOS groups, but everywhere we can to everyone we can.”

“It’s a little ironic that many churches today will do anything and everything but the one thing Jesus commanded us to do. I felt like most of my previous ministry was centered on building the church. When you take the words of Jesus seriously, He said that He would build His church. He asked us to sow the seed of the gospel and proclaim the kingdom of heaven, and sharing Bible stories is the best way I have found to sow the seeds of the gospel.”

Immigrant Work Blessed by Bible Stories

Larry Dinkins is discipling people from Thailand in Los Angeles using orality methods. The small group of about 10 Thai immigrants meets each Saturday. Dinkins is trained in the Simply the Story (STS) method.

Dinkins’ group of Thai immigrants break into two groups and then prepare a Bible story together. After the preparation time, they select a storyteller for that particular Bible story. The storyteller then goes to the other group and gives a presentation of that story. In one year they plan to cover more than 100 stories.

“We use 43 optimum stories that STS suggests. As we complete those we will move on to the 296 [Bible stories] that are in the STS expanded set. ... We are trying to give them a broad look at the meta narrative.”

The Thai church also uses Bible stories to train during their Sunday School hour. The pastor and another believer he has trained from their church travel to Thailand each year.

Dinkins said, “We are seeing how impactful storytelling is here in the Thai churches of America and then how they are using it for outreach in their original country of Thailand.”

What if my experience is different?

Jesus said “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16:13 ESV).



Figure 15 Larry Dinkins leads a Bible study among immigrants from Thailand living in Los Angeles, Calif.

One criticism that is justified with this approach is that it can be viewed as trying to “sell” people on orality methods. Practices that have not proved fruitful have not outweighed the success. Negatives might be elements such as:

- Telling too many Bible stories in the Evangelism Track only to have a household refuse to accept Christ after months of patiently listening and hearing Old and New Testament Stories. This led to a panorama type story, such as “Creation to the Cross (C2C).”
- Interpreters getting names and titles wrong. An honest interpreter warned Christian volunteers that they were getting the character Isaac confused with Ishmael when telling the story of Abraham’s Sacrifice story in a Muslim people group. Back translating is important. What is really being communicated?
- Becoming so zealous for the cause of the Orality Movement that it offends those who have not had time to wrestle with the implications, so they shut it all off and walk away.
- Using Bible story sets in one culture that was intended to address the cultures of another people group. If it worked there, they assume, it should work here—and doesn’t.

The point here is not to identify every bad practice—or good ones—but to say that success isn’t always the case. “Results may vary” is used as a warning label and perhaps can go with orality, too. The point is to commit to making disciple-makers of all people, even oral learners, as the Holy Spirit leads.

The last set of best practices titled, Prayer, Care, and Share, are the three elements of Mission America Coalition’s Love2020 Initiative. They were developed by Mark Snowden for the International Orality Network (<http://orality.net>) or for his TruthSticks blog, which specifically addresses orality in Western, postmodern contexts (<http://TruthSticks.us>).

PRAYER: Prayer & Orality

Is there a difference between the way that literate-preference and oral-preference learners pray? The Apostle Paul urged all kinds of prayer. Praying by oral learners is to



Figure 16 Kathy Branzell, Mission America Coalition, prayerfully listens at an evangelism conference.

be encouraged! “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18 NASB).

Prayer is so intensely personal that many of us will do more modeling than teaching on prayer. Many new believers have a background where prayers are typically read aloud. Or possibly they are prayed aloud in a literate way, using bullet points to list prayer needs. Because of the heavily ornate and “flowery” public prayers in Bible studies as well as corporate worship, oral-preference learners may not believe they can pray publicly as well as privately. They can easily develop a marred identity thinking they’re not “good enough” to approach the very throne of God. Highly literate prayers have the potential to seal off free access to God for oral-oriented believers.

Here are some of my own observations. Consider these descriptive and not prescriptive, please! Praying among oral learners is likely to be more from the heart and free-wheeling. It can take on a sing-song fashion akin to chanting and poetry. There’s often a melodic rhythm that begins to emerge. I’ve often heard the word “Lord” used more like punctuation. And the word/sound “and, uh” can start every thought so that the prayer can actually be one long run-on sentence. It also sends a signal to others that “I’m not done yet.” It may contain personal accounts of troubles or detailed descriptions of the troubles of others. There may also be prayers that include memorized verbatim Bible verses or possibly entire Bible stories that convey what is on their heart. And they usually are not time-sensitive, lasting much longer than well-honed prayer “highlights” used by literate worldview people who pray.

Prayer is so intensely personal that many of us will do more modeling than teaching on prayer.

God hears our prayers – when we pray. So, why not teach on prayer using Bible stories and model prayer that opens up access to God for oral learners?

CARE: Expressing Care with Bible Stories

When you seek to meet the needs of others, how can you use Bible stories? Listening to people is the key. Trust that the Holy Spirit will bring Bible stories to mind, so listen to the Lord while listening to the person in need.

When I returned to my hotel after church, a young man stepped into the hallway to greet me. He noticed that I was carrying a Bible and said, “Are you a preacher? I was in the lobby when you checked in and overheard you talking about Jesus.” We went into the parking lot outside of the lobby. He poured out his heart about accepting Christ five years before, but how he had done drugs, used women, and been fired from several jobs. He said he was sick of his life and was at a crossroads. He had tried physical solutions and psychological solutions, but they had all failed. He asked if I could give him a spiritual solution.

Now it was time to go into ministry mode in storying style. I asked him if he knew the Bible story of the Prodigal Son. On the spot, he told it to me, even citing the chapter number in Luke, but oddly, he left out one important part. I asked him, “What happened that made the younger son want to return to his father?” He drew a blank. As we often see, he knew about the story, but he didn’t know the story.

Just as conversationally as we had been talking, I storied just that part and slowed down to emphasize: “He came to his senses. He had a change of heart.” Then I stayed in storying mode and asked, “Have you come to your senses? Will you tell God what’s on your heart?” He stopped talking to me and broke into one of the coolest prayers of repentance I’ve ever heard. He thanked me and I left him talking by phone to his sponsor to say he wanted to accept the challenges that lay before him on his recovery.

Helping others discover Bible truths for themselves takes the focus off of you and onto God, where it should be.

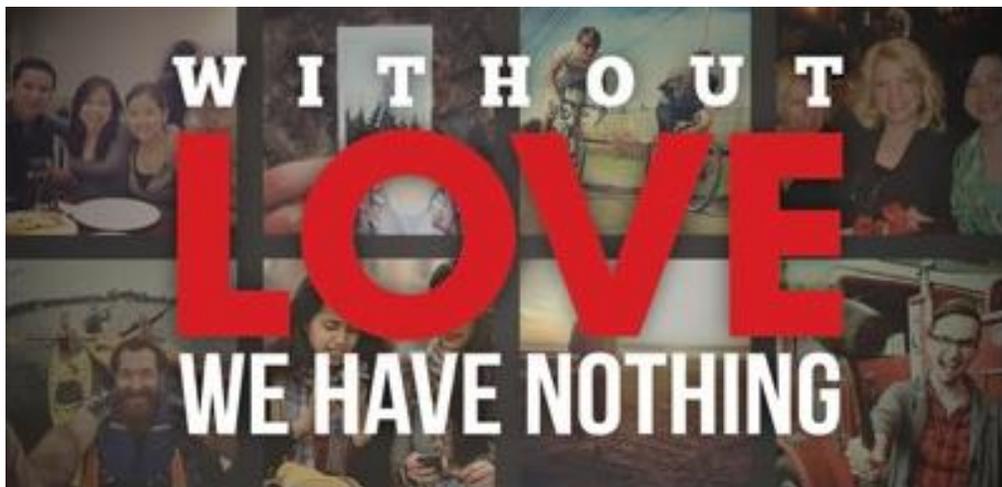
Helping others discover Bible truths for themselves takes the focus off of you and onto God, where it should be. As we say in workshops, the responsibility for learning (and ministry) shifts from you to the learner.

SHARE: Evangelizing Children with Bible Stories

We already know that lower-literacy adults who hear Bible stories crave reading the Bible for themselves and are often motivated to improve their reading skills. The same is true with children. If they already know many of the Bible stories, it helps them read the literacy levels of the Bible much quicker, too. Bible stories can be told on car rides, camping adventures, and at sporting events. Wherever life happens when you can have quality conversation time, children can not only find a told Bible story interesting, but it deepens their relationship with the Lord as well as you.

Telling Bible stories to children begins their life of faith and facts. They grow up having a deeper appreciation for God’s Word. At Easter this year, I storied the Crucifixion and Resurrection story for my granddaughter. Meanwhile, her mother, grandmother, and great grandparents listened in. They each chimed in from time to time adding details they loved in the story and wanted to be sure that I included them. Sometimes they helped me catch a term that I glossed over such as “centurion.” Storying the Bible with children is a privilege, especially when it includes their extended family!

So don’t be shy to gather children around you and say, “Hey, kids, have you heard the story about....”



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1 Thessalonians 5:17

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