

## AUDIO BIBLES AND THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

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Let me first of all thank the editors of the Journal of Global Missiology for allowing me the privilege of saying a few words about Audio Bibles and the ministry of ***Faith Comes By Hearing*** in using technology towards the fulfillment of the Great Commission. I recognize the tremendous debt organizations such as ours owe to the work of countless missionaries and missiologists before us in understanding the needs of the unreached world and devising strategies to reach the very ends of the earth with the Gospel.

At Faith Comes By Hearing, we are passionately committed to making the Word of God freely available to everyone, everywhere in the language and format they can best use. As some 70% of the world's population is illiterate and/or live in oral cultures<sup>2</sup>, we see a great need for and work toward the recording and distribution of non-print (audio and video) Bibles.

We are also passionately committed to harnessing the very latest technology for Kingdom use. Of course, we are not alone in this regard, as Christ-followers have been doing this for centuries. Our Lord Himself was known to use what I would call *natural technology* to amplify the sound of his voice by speaking down a hillside or across water—using the laws of nature to increase the reach of his voice.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP54\\_IG25.pdf](http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP54_IG25.pdf)

## **Background**

The history of our own ministry really begins in the late 1960's when my father, Jerry Jackson made the radical decision to sell our home in California and move our family of six into a bus. For the better part of four years, we drove the western part of the U.S. ministering at local churches, Vacation Bible Schools, and any other venue God opened for us. We even spent one summer in a hippy colony in the woods of Oregon, where God did a mighty work among young people who were willing to go to tremendous lengths to fill their spiritual longings.

Then we took up temporary residence on a Hopi (Native American) reservation in Northern Arizona. A number of others workers had come before us and a small church building had been used, but Christianity was only (at best) a surface reality. Alcoholism, domestic violence, and animism all remained a part of daily life for those we were ministering to. But one day my father was in the church building and came upon a bookshelf of Hopi Bibles. Curious as to why they were locked in a broom closet as opposed to being used, we were told that the main problem was that very few of the Hopi could read – so print Bibles were of little value to them. He was heartbroken by this reality and began to dream of ways to record the Hopi Bible so those shackled by illiteracy could hear.

Fast-forward to 1972. God (quite to our surprise) had settled the family in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Through a series of events too lengthy to go into detail here, we launched a ministry that (among other things) recorded the English New Testament onto cassette and sold them just above cost to churches and individuals all over the country. Cassettes were cutting-edge technology at the time, and by the early 1980's we were soon one of the largest users of cassette tapes in the entire world. Within just a few years we were being approached by missionaries and pastors from other countries pleading with us to expand our work to include

other languages as poverty and illiteracy were major barriers to missions work. We quickly realized that audio recorded Scriptures were a need all over the world.

As much as half the people alive today cannot read printed text in their heart language. In many cases (such as the Quechua of Peru), even those who are afforded a formal education are only taught to read or write in a trade language. Yet, they are speaking a different language in their homes. If they stay within their community, they don't have a need to use the trade language (especially in a print format), and thus remain essentially illiterate. Centuries of cross-cultural mission work has shown again and again that people and churches can only thrive when using their heart language – the language they pray and express their deepest emotions in. Of course, tremendous strides are being made in the areas of Bible translation, but today millions of speakers of minority languages are cut off from Scripture because of illiteracy and the fact that church services are being held in trade languages. Even many pastors cannot read the Bible well enough to study or prepare a sermon.

This is well known now, but in the late 1980s many people were still discovering these heart-breaking realities. Obviously, the ability to read is a major social and economic advantage to people in virtually any culture and we are grateful to the ministries who are focused on this skill, but we felt that we couldn't wait for people to learn to read before they could understand the Gospel and full teachings of Scripture.

## **Recordings**

Sensing that God was moving us in new direction, we established recording teams to go into various parts of the world to find indigenous speakers to record full New Testaments.

At the time, the process required photocopying a New Testament text onto larger sheets of paper, and using colored pencils or highlighters to divide the text into individual reader/voice parts (Jesus, the narrator, the apostles, etc). These pages were then placed into three-ring binders

to be used as scripts for the readers. In addition to these bulky binders, the teams also had to carry heavy reel-to-reel recorders. The completed reels were shipped to our studios in New Mexico where edits were made by physical splicing and taping.

Over time, we were able to convert the script to an Excel spreadsheet, making it possible to sort by voice parts. Then laptop computers became available, not only could they hold the script, but could also be used as the actual recorders; Soon our entire recording toolbox fit into two carry-ons. This saved time in preparing the script as well as making edits to the audio files. These and other innovations eventually cut our recording time from months to weeks.

Last year, we were able to launch a Virtual Recording process, harnessing technology to complete Audio Bibles entirely via the internet. Recently, we opened auditions for a recording in a highly sensitive part of Asia, and more than 600 people responded! This was a region that we had tried for several years to get a recording team into, but the amazing reach of the Internet actually brought the voice talent to us. We are anticipating using Virtual Recording to have possibly hundreds of recording in process simultaneously.

### **Audio Bible Distribution**

For the first 15 years of our international ministry, Bible recordings on cassette were the primary media choice. We were amazed that even remote villages often had access to a portable cassette player! Millions of people worldwide were disciplined in God' Word listening from Matthew to Revelation in their heart language.

But eventually, as cassettes and even CDs began to wane in the marketplace, our president felt we needed to develop our own playback device. We asked staff members who were willing to fast and pray for three days. Near the end of that time, our engineer presented us with a prototype of a device which we've since named the Proclaimer. The Proclaimer is a totally self-contained Audio Bible playback unit with an internal battery which can be recharged

via standard A/C, solar (with its attached solar panel), and even hand crank. The sound chip is a proprietary design, so that it can never be recorded over with pop music or anything else someone may wish to broadcast.

In the past eight years, the Lord has allowed to provide more than 340,000 Proclaimer to indigenous churches, schools, hospitals, villagers, prisons, and numerous other venues in more than 150 countries. In order to get a free Proclaimer, the pastor or other leader has to agree to gather people together for a set time each week. Often the group leader is a village elder, whose invitation to the group virtually guarantees full participation. These “listening groups” listen to the Audio New Testament for at least 30 minutes and then spend time discussing the passage and how to apply it to their specific cultural context. Thorny issues like polygamy, syncretism versus contextualization, how to love your enemy when your enemy is trying to kill you, and a myriad of others can be biblically discussed by the entire community of believers—whether they are young or old, educated or uneducated.

By following this simple method, the group will hear and discuss the entire New Testament one or more times within a year. Often a single Proclaimer is recharged, passed around, and used multiple times a week for multiple listening groups. Some literally play day and night, and our research shows that a single Proclaimer unit will eventually be heard by at least 90 people! Our regional workers will also return to these villages to follow-up to see that the groups are still going and to collect testimonies. Over the years, the five most reported transformations taking place as a result of group listening are:

- people stop getting drunk
- men stop beating their wives
- people stop visiting non-Christian shrines
- believers become bolder in sharing their faith and churches grow
- church-goers begin to tithe, allowing bi-vocational pastors to focus more time on church ministry

The Proclaimer's engineering has since been re-designed to include a pocket-sized version (MiniProclaimer) for areas where group listening must be discreet and the micro-Proclaimer (small enough to attach to a keychain). In addition, a small, digital audio player called a BibleStick is used for individual listening in sensitive regions. Each device is pre-loaded with the New Testament in one of our 740+ available languages.

### **Digital Bible Platform**

Communication technology is changing and developing at a rate that is nearly impossible to keep up with. Ten years ago, less than 25% of the world had Internet access; today populations with access to the Internet has topped 96%. And the number of cell phone subscriptions has risen from 662 million in 2003 to 6.4 billion at the end of 2012. This equates to 91% of the world's population.<sup>3</sup>

So, in 2010, Faith Comes By Hearing launched the Digital Bible Platform, which includes the Bible.is app, and houses the world's largest collection of digital Bibles in audio and text. To date more than 107 million people from virtually every country on earth have engaged with Scripture (audio, text, and *JESUS* film clips) via podcasts, streaming sessions, and downloads.

This year, utilizing the Digital Bible Platform, we released over 700 Internet radio stations through iTunes, and also added a partnership with SAT-7 to broadcast the Arabic Audio Bible via satellite TV across the Middle East and North Africa. The opportunity to expand satellite coverage and reach people with God's Word is staggering.

Amazingly to me (since we're known as an audio ministry), God has even opened up doors to reach the world's Deaf population through the Deaf Bible.is app. This app currently has

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2013.pdf>

the complete video recording of the New Testament and portions of the Old Testament in American Sign Language, and will soon include numerous other sign languages as well.

### **The Future is Now**

Groups such as O3b (Other 3 billion) are committed to make broadband connection available to the three billion people on earth who currently do not have it. This will mean that literally everyone on earth will have the potential to access the Word of God digitally.

These are truly exciting times to be alive, and my sincere prayer is that the church remains on the very cutting edge of technology to take advantage of every single opportunity and means to take the Good News to the very ends of the earth. We at Faith Comes by Hearing are honored to be a part of that mission by harnessing and deploying technology as a strategy for Scripture distribution.

(1) [http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP54\\_IG25.pdf](http://www.lausanne.org/docs/2004forum/LOP54_IG25.pdf)

(2) <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2013.pdf>