

RESONANCE AND SYNERGY: THE IMPACT OF ORAL BIBLE STORYTELLING IN RURAL ETHIOPIA

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Abstract

Mission strategists have recognized that the largest and fastest growing populations in the world tend to be oral learners who use primarily oral means for communication, processing knowledge, and establishing it as authoritative. This article explores the findings of a study on the impact of the Simply the Story method, an oral method of Bible storytelling, among rural village communities in Ethiopia. The combined effect of internalization of the biblical stories through memorization, use of group discussion to provoke critical reflection, and interpretation of the narratives through formulaic questions that explore the literary conventions of plot and characterizations seemed to create a dynamic synergy that empowered members of marginalized communities to deeply engage the biblical text and come to rich, appropriate interpretation in the context of a supportive, relational environment. This brought profound levels of individual and communal transformation and skill development that empowered the participants to train others and engage in effective evangelism.

Introduction

The followers of Christ in each generation have been given the breathtaking privilege of acting as the heralds of the Good News of salvation to the people of their own time.¹ Each generation has their own unique task of discerning God's purposes for how that calling is meant to be fulfilled, which includes the considerable challenge of contextualizing the methods for proclamation and discipleship in the midst of complex cultural dynamics.² In this generation, the tremendous population growth of people groups that are predominantly non-literate has led to the recognition that efforts to bring them literacy and Bible translations are not going to suffice in terms of providing them with a meaningful witness to Christ. This led to theoretical work concerning the distinctive qualities of oral learners, or (for the purposes of this study), individuals and communities who employ predominantly oral modes for communicating, processing knowledge, retaining it, and establishing what knowledge is given authoritative or canonical status.³

¹ Matt. 28:16-20; Acts 1:6-8

² See Acts 17:16-34 for an illustration of Paul's negotiation of the cultural dynamics he faced in Athens; 1 Cor. 8-10 for Paul's complex response to cultural issues related to eating from the food made by idols; Ro. 14 for Paul's explanation regarding how to address profound differences in the Christian community about convictions that do not violate essential doctrines.

³ Samuel Chiang and Grant Lovejoy, "The Extent of Orality: 2012 Update," *Orality Journal* 1, no. 1, (2012): 11-39. For an understanding of how oral strategists look at the reality of oral learners vs. literate learners pp. 17-18.

Oral strategists from what might be called the orality movement in evangelical missions have sought to harness the manner in which these characteristics manifest in the wholeness of life in terms of: the dominant use of narratives, a reliance on symbols, poetic language and music, and a priority on relationships and events (often in the form of rituals).⁴ The assumption is that by using familiar forms to articulate the good news of Christ, the messenger will invite as little cultural noise as possible into the message.⁵ One of the primary goals was to develop methods that engendered the rapid replication of knowledge and skill in indigenous learners so they are able to immediately take ownership of their faith and proclamation of the Gospel.

Oral Strategies and Narrative

One of the primary oral modes that have been incorporated into oral strategies is the use of narratives taken from the biblical text. The effectiveness of the use of stories on the mission field has long been noted.⁶ Oral learners rely heavily on the construct of narrative to make sense of their world.⁷ Bible Storytelling, sometimes called storying, was developed for these purposes and is now being used on every continent. It appears to be having a profound effect.⁸

The Processing Power of Narrative

Narratives have been identified as a key construct for human communication and processing information in a number of fields. Educational psychologist Jerome Bruner asserted that narrative is the paradigm through which meaning is developed and maintained within a culture, including the network of common beliefs, symbols, and roles that have been canonized by the dominant narratives as authoritative representations of reality. Moreover, these cultural narratives profoundly influence how individuals come to understand their societal and relational roles by which to form and maintain their identity.⁹

⁴ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 8-14; Paul Koehler, *Telling God's story with power: Biblical Storytelling in Oral Cultures*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2010), 12-15. See Koehler's helpful table comparing the differences between literate and oral learners on p. 15.

⁵ Samuel Chiang et al., *Making Disciples of Oral Learners: Lausanne Occasional Paper (LOP) No. 54*. (Lima, NY: International Orality Network, 2004). Koehler, *Tell God's Story With Power*, 12.

⁶ Tom Steffen and J.O. Terry, J.O., "The Sweeping Story of Scripture Taught Through Time," *Missiology: An International Review* 35, no. 3 (2007), 315-334.; J.O. Terry, "The Worldwide Spread of Bible Storying: A Look at Where We've Been," *Orality Journal* 1 no. 1 (2012), 41-61. Accessed February 12, 2016.; Tom Steffen, "Pedagogical conversions: From propositions to story and symbol." *Missiology: An International Review* 38, 2 (2010), 141-159.

⁷ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 34. G. Anser, G., "The crucial role of oral-scripture: focus Africa." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 12, no. 2 (1995): 65.; Klem, Herbert, "Dependence on Literacy Strategy: Taking a Hard Second Look." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 12 no. 2, (1995): 59-64.

⁸ Handley, Joe, "Partnership Training for Oral Culture," *Orality Journal* 3, no. 1 (2013): 57-58.

⁹ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 34-38.

Wright, N. T. *The New Testament and the People of God*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992, 42-43, 65. Steffen, *Pedagogical Conversions*, 148.

Transformation of Culture

Paul Ricoeur described the process of narrative impact in three stages: (1) An author draws understanding from the “symbolic order” of her culture.¹⁰ This complex of cultural meaning is inherently learned and understood by its members much as language is absorbed and naturally known, though by looking at rituals, symbols, religious beliefs, etc., rather than through interpersonal communication. (2) She then forms a story that incorporates existing cultural values and brings new concepts to bear on them. This conceptualization is conveyed through a distillation of the complex realities of life into a fixed, unchanging form by portraying them in the form of a story, or an imitation of reality. As the characters encounter these complexities, they have choices that are similar to those available to the audience. The author depicts her understanding of the meaning of the complexities of life through the choices that her characters make and the outcomes that result from their choices. The stories, then, become artifacts that codify the message that the author has about the multifaceted, dynamic nature of human life and culture into a consumable form for others.¹¹ To put it in more literary terms, the author depicts causal relationships as the plotline develops in such a way that the impact and consequences of the events and choices of the characters communicates the author’s message about cause and effect in the real world.¹² (3) Members of the culture engage the narrative, attending to the inferences and assertions made by the author through the plot, and subsequently enact the influence of those lessons through their own choices. These choices, in their aggregate, bear a collective influence on the culture itself.¹³ The multitude of narratives are widely passed around and accepted, culminating in an overarching metanarrative of how a community understands itself. This metanarrative has a profound influence on the culture and the individuals within it as it bears influence on how its members will read their world, determine what choices in life are worthy of acceptance or condemnation, and form their understanding of what is meaningful and good.

Missologist Tom Steffen identified the manner in which stories, symbols, and rituals are critical aspects of God’s multi-faceted engagement with humanity as he instructs through the biblical text.¹⁴ Stories are a universal paradigm by which humans form their personal identity as they learn to interpret their events and circumstances for meaning and integrate them into a cohesive understanding of their broader life story.¹⁵ Symbols, on the other hand, organize multiple interrelated concepts into a singular image that encapsulates the manner in which a

¹⁰ William C. Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 2.

¹¹ M.S. Sugiyama, “Narrative Theory and Function: Why Evolution Matters.” *Philosophy and Literature*, 25 no. 2 (2001): 234 on the universality of plot and function; 235, 242-243 on narrative themes.

¹² Meir Sternberg, M. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 42-51; See also James Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 38-39, 122-123, 197-199.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Vol. 1). (K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, Trans.). (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 53.; Dowling, *Ricoeur on Time and Narrative*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011), 65-67.

¹⁴ Tom Steffen, “The Foundational Roles of Symbol and Narrative in the (Re)construction of Reality and Relationships.” *Missiology: An International Review*, 26, no. 4 (1998), 477-494.

¹⁵ P.L. Hammack, “Narrative and the Cultural Psychology of Identity.” *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 12, no. 3 (2008): 222, accessed from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1088868308316892>.

given culture has brought these complexities together and made meaning. These cultural stories and symbols are thought to be the primary basis for behavioral choices.¹⁶ Rituals are a way of rehearsing the stories and symbols to assure generational continuity.

By engaging cultural narratives, such as movies, historical accounts, and religious texts, individuals encounter potential symbols and storylines for adoption as paradigms by which to form their identity and understand their roles. Consider, for example, the symbolic power of a black leather jacket (as opposed to, say, a pocket protector) in the West, particularly if it is accompanied by a motorcycle. The symbol of the black leather jacket has been couched in dozens of influential cultural narratives from Marlon Brando and James Dean in the nineteen fifties to “the Fonz” on *Happy Days*, the popular television show in the nineteen seventies and early eighties. As individuals encounter and internalize stories such as these in the context of the broader cultural acceptance or rejection of them, the characters become deeply imbedded models, heroes or antiheroes, that legitimize or delegitimize the roles they portray.

Transformation of the Individual

The Bible provides both a metanarrative, or the overarching story of human history from God’s perspective, as well as micro-narratives that depict in detail the ways in which God has interacted with his servants as they participate and partner with him in his unfolding plan. Steffen suggested that the purpose of the pervasive use of narrative in scripture is not only to communicate content, it also illustrates how that content is best communicated to others to bear influence.¹⁷ When new stories are introduced into a culture, they confront old cultural narratives according to their truthfulness and desirability, and therefore have the potential to subvert prior beliefs and assumptions even as they are introducing new ones.¹⁸ The biblical stories are meant to impact individuals and cultures on profoundly transformative levels, providing new storylines by which to interpret reality, form worldview, and establish identity. Moreover, the new images provided by the story are imbued with the sort of symbolic power that drives behavior.

Literary Conventions and Transformation

Jewish literary scholar Meir Sternberg asserts that the authors of the biblical stories were conscious of their role of using the literary conventions of narrative to portray the events of scripture in a way that both conveyed the divine lesson behind each story for the characters and provoke a similar lesson in the audience as they engage the text.¹⁹ The gaps of information in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:1-19) are not a demonstration of poor writing skills on the part of the author. On the contrary, they are the intentional employment of literary conventions to provoke the same tensions in the audience as the characters were experiencing on the long, silent journey to Mount Moriah.²⁰ As Abraham allowed his son to carry the wood upon

¹⁶ Steffen, “Pedagogical Conversions,” 148-150.

¹⁷ Steffen, “Pedagogical Conversions,” 148-150.

¹⁸ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 40-43.

¹⁹ Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 48.; See also Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 20-21.

²⁰ Leland Ryken, Introduction to *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, 15-39. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 17.

which he would be burned, the audience is meant to be troubled by a father who could obey such a command and react against the notion of a God that would command it. As they wrestle with the choices of the God of the story, they are engaging their understanding of their own God to whom they pray. They are confronted with the implications the command had for God's character, just as Abraham must have been, only he did so in the midst of immediate, forward marching obedience.

The offensiveness of God's requirement and Abraham's compliance is the intended effect of the author. He could have let the audience know at the outset that God was pressing Abraham to live by utter faith, exhibiting Abraham's freedom to move in obedience to God with unquestioning, surrendered trust. He could have explained that because of years of prior faithfulness, Abraham was able to obey God and trust his character in circumstances that seemed to contradict it. Instead, the divinely inspired author chose to bring the audience through the experience of Abraham's story as it unfolded in time, just as Abraham experienced it. This gives the audience an opportunity to check their own response to God's character against the model of Abraham, the great father of the faith.

Summary

The biblical authors were literary master craftsmen of the first order, engaging poetics to provoke simulations of experience in the audience so they are able to receive the same lessons that God was teaching the characters in the story.²¹ A full interpretation of the biblical narratives requires that the audience understands how to engage the biblical text according to the literary conventions used by the authors to convey their intended meaning.²² This includes attending to: the setting, the unfolding plot, the depictions of the characters, the impact of their choices, and the final resolution of the story.²³ By attending to these elements, the story is meant to act as an agent of transformation in the individual, and therefore, as we have seen with Ricoeur and Steffen, of their culture.²⁴ These assertions about narrative have interesting implications for oral strategists and those implementing Bible storytelling among oral learners.

Bible Storytelling on the Mission Field: The STS Method

While there is widespread acceptance and implementation of the Bible storytelling as an oral strategy and a great deal of anecdotal evidence of its effectiveness, there is a need for formal research to investigate its effectiveness in practice, particularly as it bears increasing influence on the field of missions. This includes factors such as: (1) the degree to which the method resonates culturally, particularly as an oral strategy, (2) whether significant levels of learning and transformation take place with implementation, and if so, according to what nature, (3) the

²¹ M.S. Sugiyama, "Narrative Theory and Function," 238-240.

²² Grant Osborne, "Historical Narrative and Truth in the Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 4 (2005): 679-680.; Ryken, "A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible," 17-19.

²³ Tremper Longman III, "Biblical Narrative." In *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken & Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 70-74.; Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in this Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 337-338.; Longman III, "Biblical Narrative," 71-74.

²⁴ Osborne, "Historical Narrative," 680.

degree and manner to which it enables learners to teach others and replicate their learning (particularly in terms of engaging their families and faith communities, and in evangelism). A number of storytelling models have been developed among oral strategists. The focus of this study is on the Simply the Story method.

An Overview

The Simply the Story (STS) method is a form of oral inductive Bible study. There are several reasons it was chosen for this research. (1) It attends directly to the content of particular biblical stories as written by the authors rather than crafting stories together from larger portions of the biblical text. (2) It provides a robust method of interpreting the narratives according to the literary conventions employed by the author. (3) It seeks to pass the skills of storytelling, biblical interpretation, and application to the learner from the first sessions of the learning process through its pedagogical design. (4) It trains learners to pass these skills on immediately to new learners for discipleship and evangelism, with the goal of rapid multiplication to succeeding generations of learners.

The model consists of five stages that focus on the biblical stories through group discussion led by a trained teacher or facilitator.²⁵ The first three stages involve memorizing the story according to a dynamic equivalence of the text so that the participants are able to engage the text as the authors communicated it. The fourth stage is an investigation of the author's intent by moving slowly through each part of the story with a series of questions that are directed at the setting, plotline, and characters: What is the background (including historical and theological) of the story and its immediate context? What did the characters say and do? What choices did they make? What other choices could they have made (that highlight the importance, motivation behind, or failure of what they did choose)? What were the immediate consequences and long-term impact of that choice? What do these things teach us about God?²⁶

The spiritual observation questions are first used by the teacher or facilitator to study the story and prepare the lesson. The same questions are then used in the process of teaching the story in the context of group discussion. This provides an immediate model of how to approach the text with the questions and gives learners a chance to practice asking and answering them in a communal context of mutual support. It also allows the learners to experience the story and engage the characters in all their humanity through each unfolding development in the narrative. The participants work together to draw insights that are then taken to the final stage for personal application. This clear movement from text to application teaches the learners to distinguish between what the text originally meant and what it means for today, giving the participants an opportunity to practice negotiating that shift in a corporate environment with competent facilitators.²⁷ The participants reflect together about what each of the insights gained from the

²⁵ Overstreet, Mark "A Response to Theological Education as Incarnational Missiology: Empowering and Affirming Oral Learners in Oral Culture Pastor Training" in *Beyond Literate Western Models: Contextualizing Theological Education in Oral Context*, edited by Samuel Chiang and Grant Lovejoy (Hong Kong: International Orality Network, 2013), 163-174.

²⁶ Osborne, "Historical Narrative," 679-680; 683-685.; Ryken, *A Complete Literary Guide*, 15-38.; Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning*, 3.; Steffen, "Pedagogical Conversions," 147.; Wright, *The New Testament*, 70-73.

²⁷ Ryken, *Literary Guide*, 21.; Colgate, Jack. "Making the Story Meaningful, Part 1: Relational Bible Storying and Scripture Use in Oral Muslim Contexts." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 25 no. 3 (2008): 135.; McAdams, Dan, "The Psychology of Life Stories," *Review of General Psychology*, 5, no. 2 (2001): 100-122.

ancient text might tell us about today in terms of the world, their community, and their personal lives.²⁸ Throughout the training, the vision is cast that the goal is to not only teach participants how to master the method for themselves, but to immediately transfer of each gain in mastery to others for discipleship and evangelism.

The Oral Bible Schools of Ethiopia

While Simply the Story conducts shorter workshops for training people in the method, the focus of this research is on their strategy of forming Oral Bible Schools (OBSs). These schools consist of small groups of no more than twelve participants. The goal is to learn 296 stories from Genesis to Revelation with a trained facilitator. They are currently being implemented on some level in Ethiopia, Kenya, Togo, Senegal, Benin, Egypt, India, Nepal, the Philippines and countries in the Middle East and West Africa that can't be named because of the risk of endangering the programs.²⁹ The format of the schools is intentionally flexible so that it can adjust to the large range of circumstances that exist from region to region. The present study was conducted in Ethiopia in partnership with Pastor John Nderitu, a Kenyan missionary and the national leader and founder of the ministry in Ethiopia, and his team.

One of the strategies of Simply the Story in Ethiopia is to work in partnership with the leaders of local, indigenous evangelical denominations who are looking for ways to equip their people to study scripture and proclaim the Gospel to the Orthodox (39.52% of the population) and Muslim members of the community (34.1%), many of whom are under the influence of local shamans, or, as the participants called them, witch doctors. There are eighty-five indigenous languages spoken in Ethiopia, only seven of which have translation of the whole Bible, and among these, there are not enough for distribution. Another major concern for the church in Ethiopia is a lack of leadership training.³⁰ This study focuses primarily on the ministries of the Kale Heywot denomination in the Gurage region and the Emmanuel Light and Life Church in the Bonga zone. The majority of the parishioners for these churches are oral learners, including a large percentage who are semi- and non-literate. The OBSs are formed into groups of twelve or fewer participants with trained leaders who oversee the process. At times the leaders also participate as a members of the group. The smaller number is thought to insure the active participation of every member. In general, the groups develop their own contracts at the outset, determining how often they will meet and where. There is a great diversity to implementation, from the work in Gurage which asked the Oral Bible School students to meet together every day for a week once a month over a year, to the schools in the Bonga zone which function more like weekly small groups for the church and will likely take two years to complete.

Accessed from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100>; McLean, K.C., & Fournier, M.A. "The Content and Processes of Autobiographical Reasoning in Narrative Identity." *Journal of Research in Personality* 42, no. 3, (2008): 527-545. Accessed from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2007.08.003>.

²⁸ Steffen, "Pedagogical Conversions," 148.

²⁹ Interview with executive director of the God's Story Project, Andrea Pebbles on February 12, 2016,

³⁰ Mandryk, *Operation World*, 327-330

Research Design

The participants for this study were chosen according to a quota sample. For the first stage, twenty-seven semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with participants (twenty-six male, one female) who were chosen by their denominational leaders to receive extensive training in the STS Bible study method. This included eighteen participants from the Gurage region who have graduated from a full Oral Bible School program. An additional seven participants from the Kefa zone have received special training in order to lead parishioners through Oral Bible Schools in the local churches. Two more Oral Bible School graduates were interviewed from the Amhara region in northern Ethiopia.

For the second stage of the research, an additional five focus group interviews (48 total participants, including 22 men and 26 women across the adult age range) were conducted with members of the communities where Oral Bible School graduates and STS leaders have been implementing their training in storytelling. There was a wide range of educational levels among the participants, ranging from several years of Bible college to those who self-identified as non-literate. Moreover, a number of those among the most educated identified themselves specifically as oral learners because of their preferred modes of processing information and communicating.³¹ Both the individual and focus group interviews were conducted by the primary researcher with Ethiopian translators from Amharic, which was a second language for most of the participants. These interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes using NVivo.

The final stage of the research was a modified version of the Most Significant Change model. Key informants from the STS leadership in Ethiopia were brought together to engage the answers given by the interviewees regarding what they believed to be the most significant change to come about as a result of the Oral Bible School in light of leader's goals for the program. Their discussion was recorded, and the primary researcher took extensive notes and asked clarifying questions. The data that emerged from this portion of the research was primarily used to triangulate the data from the interviews and provide further insight into the themes that emerged.

The research questions were designed to allow for a broad range of responses, including information that was not anticipated by the researchers or prior theory.

Research Questions

1. What has been the impact, if any, of the STS method of learning the biblical narratives in an OBS setting, including on a personal and familial level for the students and on the level of their impact on their community?
2. What has been the impact, if any, of the STS model of learning the biblical narratives in terms of the different stages of the oral strategy as they were engaged by the participants?

³¹ “To the extent that people rely on spoken communication instead of written communication, they are characterized by ‘orality’. There are degrees of orality, depending on whether someone relies on spoken language totally or less than totally.” From Grant Lovejoy, “Extent of Orality,” *Orality Journal* 1, no. 1 (2012): 12.

Report on the Findings

The responses of the participants indicated that the overall outcomes of the STS model were a direct result of the particular stages of the pedagogy. As a result, several of the dominant themes were defined by the stages.

Stages of Storytelling Themes

Internalization. This was a two-fold theme. It encompassed frequent references to internalizing the stories in terms of the initial process of memorization and the deeper levels of cognitive and affective imbedding that took place because of the manner in which the participants deeply engaged the characters and drew lessons for their own lives through the STS method. Memorizing the stories seems to have acted as an initiating engagement of the text that led to a host of subsequent benefits. Participants noted that this allowed them to continually meditate on the Word throughout their day, recall biblical counsel in the midst of the complexities of life and decision-making, and share scripture in a meaningful and appealing way to others, including the lost.

A number of participants explained that their prior deficit of having limited ongoing access to scripture was redeemed and became a source of strength because the need to memorize the stories secured the Word in their hearts and, as one participant stated, “made us walking Bibles.” This provided a sense of ownership of their faith, as an Oral Bible School graduate from Gurage explained:

“I have seen a change both in me and the people I minister to. As I present the story, all of it is kept in their minds. And when they hear a story they are very happy and understand that the Lord can change people’s stories. And I have also heard them tell the story to others and preach the gospel. And so they testify to me that they have found a new thing. So I see the change between my ministry before the school and after the school in the life of the people I minister to and in myself.”

The new levels of sharing had an impact on the broader community as its members increased in mutual understanding of the stories. A critical aspect of this seems to have been the event of learning itself when the participants engaged the stories in community, which at one point was described as a form of meditation, and found insights together. This created symbols of reference for a corporate, biblical understanding of complex issues that the participants tended to encounter in life. The mere mention of Martha and Mary was an assertion of the importance of making time with the Lord a priority.³² An important element of this empowerment was that instead of developing lessons that drew together numerous texts from across scripture, the focus was on one shorter text in the form of a narrative. This meant they could remember the text in a way that allowed them to continue to deeply explore its meaning for themselves and share it with others.

³² Luke 10:38-42

Group Discussion

While group discussion is not a specific stage in the method, it is the format by which two of the stages (Spiritual Observation and Spiritual Application) are conducted and emerged as a major theme in the interviews. It was identified by a number of participants to be culturally appropriate on a number of levels, most particularly the incorporation of storytelling and the ability to learn in relationship with others. The nature of the discussion format was often described as enjoyable or fun, which in some cases seemed to engender a sort of group synergy and excitement about engaging the stories. Meanwhile, a number of participants, including those who are leaders, said that prior educational experiences, generally identified as sermons and forms of lecture, caused the learners to feel intimidated about the process of biblical study to the point where they were afraid to answer questions or contribute.

One of the most common comments by the participants was the manner in which the process of sharing insights from the passage allowed all of the participants to contribute in a meaningful way, including the uneducated. This gave each person both the pleasure of ministering to others and the support of being ministered to. It also seemed to cultivate the skills of listening and discussing through issues of disagreement, which in turn engendered mutual respect and appreciation among the group members. For example:

“It’s comfortable for us to learn in groups. The reason why it is convenient (comfortable) is because the teacher himself learns and brother teaches brother. Whatever I have, the other fellows hear and I will also listen to what others say. Whatever we find useful we take and apply it...When one shares what he thinks is good and the other people think it’s not, that’s where we are able to discuss it. The person who is sitting in the group and is quiet does not mean he or she is foolish. When he or she opens her mouth they have many things to say.”

Several participants explained that the process of discussion fostered a deeper love between the members of the group. One of the participants explained that he and his fellow students were able to take the experience of a deepened sense of love for each other (such as occurred in their Oral Bible School) and cultivate it as an expectation when they started new groups in the church community. As much as the group discussion of the method was able to foster a communal experience of learning, some of the participants pointed out that there was still a certain amount of accountability and personal ownership required. The discussion process allowed for immediate assessment of each learner as they contributed their insights to the discussion.

Spiritual Observation Questions

The comments by the participants related to the spiritual observation questions indicate that they were a critical aspect of the method for a number of reasons. It trained the participants to slow down and look at smaller portions of the text with greater concentration. It also provided ample opportunities for modeling and practicing the process of engaging the text with the questions, creating a familiarity with the questions that made them accessible for the participant’s private study and contemplation of the biblical stories. This, in turn, seemed to

develop an almost intuitive sense of how to interact with the narrative genre to reveal meaningful spiritual insights. A number of participants, some of whom had attended formal Bible college, explained that their way of looking at the stories was entirely altered. It generated in-depth analysis of the characters and their motivations, the manner in which their choices drove the plot forward, and the consequent meaning of the story because of the way the author depicted the resolution. The participants explained that this brought out deeper implications that might not have been immediately apparent and protected against inappropriate interpretation.

The main thrust of the insights shared by the participants did not focus on abstract concepts drawn from the text that were then brought to bear on today. Rather, the lessons were imbued with a sense of intimacy with the characters themselves, expressed with the tones of relationship such as empathy, never escaping wholly to the cognitive. Some contributing factors seemed to be: the inspirational portrayal of them as brave individuals who have overcome in spite of challenging circumstances, their own sin, or negative voices around them; the status of the characters and their role as heroes in the story makes identification with them a token of personal honor; and the realistic portrayal of hope, dignity, and purpose on the other side of repentance. For example, one participant shared the impact from the stories of Moses:

“In the story of Moses, the decision he made when he was called, how the passion he had for his people made him a fugitive, how he went through such a hardship, but after that he became very useful and significant. We see that when God calls people into what look like very difficult situations and shapes them...people get the strength to stand firm in the challenges they face.”

For a number of participants, the choices of the characters seemed to act as simulations of experience in terms of what it means to respond rightly to God or choose unhelpful alternatives. For example, one focus group participant was “...very much touched by Joseph’s story, how he was persecuted, how God was with him and finally how God raised him and glorified him; and finally how God raised his family from famine...how he went through a difficult time, and went to prison, but still held on to righteousness.” This demonstrates a common theme regarding how *an appropriate spiritual insight* from a passage worked in conjunction with *a deep connection to the character* to create more profound levels of comprehension. This produced insights that navigated the complexities of what it means to be a human living in response to God in a broken world. This, in turn, allowed the participants to bring biblical truth to bear on the very real vicissitudes and challenges that humans face with compassion and relational wisdom.

Spiritual Application

The application seemed to act as the culmination of all the other stages, bringing home the observations that were found through the rest of the process. The dependence of the application stage on a robust engagement of the spiritual observation questions was made clear by explicit comments to that end by the participants and the vast majority of examples in their storytelling. Deep identification with the characters as their stories unfolded across the plotline led to insights that were directly translated as negative or positive models for the participants. This provoked intensive critical reflection regarding their own life patterns and their community as they drew comparisons with dynamics in the stories. As a result, the participants described

having new revelations about problematic areas of their lives that they had either not been aware of or had not been able to perceive with clarity.

The biblical narratives also seemed to model the demeanor by which application of the text and transformation should be addressed as an individual and in community. Instances of conviction of sin or struggle with faith were not reported with a sense of shame, a tone of self-depreciation, or the need to hide. Neither were they articulated with hints of compromise. Rather, stark honesty was expressed with tones of empathy and compassion and a dynamic sense of the participant's determination and belief in their ability overcome. The pervasiveness of the theme of redemption in the biblical stories, especially for the faithful and the contrite in spirit, seems to have been a significant factor. Consider this example from a participant regarding the story of Blind Bartimaeus:

“...and so when other people saw him they asked, “Is this not the man who used to beg by the side of the road?” But, his story has been changed now. And so, when I apply this to my life I see that the Lord can change stories.”

The model or simulation of repentance provided by the stories seemed to carry the participants directly to assurance of God's forgiveness, clearing the path from fear of rejection or other notions that might otherwise hinder the process. Here is an example of a participant who deeply engaged the story of Zacchaeus:

“He was the head of tax collectors. When he heard Jesus Christ will be passing... through his town...he decided to see Jesus by any means...but there were big crowd of people and he couldn't, [so] he went and climbed on the tree. Jesus came and saw Zacchaeus...and said to him, “Come down quickly.” Then he came down and knelt before Jesus ...Jesus was looking for the lost. A Savior has come to the son of Abraham...[but] there were still people who were saying to each other, “How Jesus could go into such a sinner's house?”

As a result if there is anything I have done wrong...I believe Jesus, who forgave Zacchaeus, will forgive all my sins when I kneel down before him and ask him to forgive what I have done wrong. I have applied that story to my life.”

According to their own words, the participants were finding themselves in the story. This seems to have amounted to a paradigm shift, providing the participants with a way to understand and share their own stories and engage the stories of others in the context of compassion and mutual support, often in the midst of addressing difficult and painful subjects.

The participants articulated numerous instances where insights drawn from specific characters confirmed and intensified their understanding of how much they matter to God and that he is actively, intimately, and providentially involved in their daily lives. The participant's sense of their newfound ability to successfully identify the way the characters rightly and wrongly related to God seemed to increase their confidence in their own ability to know how to relate rightly with God, which in turn seemed to act as an impetus to pursue greater levels of trust and obedience. This seems to have profoundly influenced their personal choices, engendered deeper levels of spiritual maturity, and provided significant levels of comfort.

There was often a tone of delight as the participants explained the internal transformations and relational blessings that flowed when they applied the wisdom they found in

the biblical stories. It also served to cultivate an all-encompassing worldview context where God's sovereign power and lavish mercy are the predominant forces of reality for determining the outcome of their story.

Outreach

Participants reported that the STS method provided a way to share the word and evangelize. Prior to the introduction of the STS training, the tendency in the church was for a few people in leadership to engage the tasks of evangelism and teaching, but with the new method these doors were opened to the whole community. There were many descriptions how the stories became imbedded in their minds so that they were easy to retell and discuss them as "interesting chats." This seems to have been a shift from prior methods of evangelism, which was done in a confrontational manner and led to rejection of the message. The participants repeatedly discussed that this was a more enjoyable way to engage people in spiritual discussion that everyone found enriching and opened doors to share the Gospel.

The method appears to have born fruit in terms of: salvation stories, transformed lives of those caught in patterns of sin such as alcoholism, new open doors because of the ability to adjust the stories to local languages, and campaigns where a number of people gave their lives to Christ, including whole families. For example:

"After the first STS workshop the instructor...said, 'Now you have stories in your heart pocket...go tell them to evangelize people.' After the workshop we entered to someone's house and...witnessed about God... The man in the household believed and after 14 days he and the other 5 members of the family joined the Christian community."

The effectiveness seems to be related in part because the stories effectively communicated a full understanding of the work of Christ:

"There is this person who back then didn't even clearly understand the salvation work of Jesus Christ but after going through the story understood it...the guy used to even drink local gin, but after listening to the story he decided to stop and made Jesus his personal savior. He had accepted Jesus before but he understood it all well through this."

The stories included illustrations of when non-literate and marginalized members of the community were sufficiently equipped to teach and persuade crowds and local leaders. For example, an Oral Bible School student relayed this story about his mother:

"Once there was a funeral in our village and my mother and I went to comfort the people, unbelievers, for their loss. An argument came up about whether Mary was a created human being. My mother stood and told the people that they are missing the truth. [This is an issue of significant contention between the Orthodox and evangelical churches in Ethiopia.] She said, "God is the one who created all things including men and woman, not Mary." There were a lot of people gathered

there and were amazed by this woman who was old and illiterate but was sharing God's word and making a strong argument with people who were literate. They wondered how this could happen. My mother said, "It is not age or education that makes one to stand boldly and speak about the word of God. The Spirit of God, who is living inside us, makes us to speak up about His word, after we received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in our lives." Many people who were gathered there and arguing...accepted what she said. The people who were watching this event from far away came closer to listen what my mother said. After we left that place I asked my mother what made her bold enough to speak up about God knowing she doesn't write or read. My mom told me that after the STS workshop, she is more encouraged to speak about God publicly because she understood well that it is not the level literacy that makes someone a teller of God's story."

The method was articulated as critical for literates to learn in part because this enabled them to pass the skill on to non-literate believers and reach non-literate non-believers with the Gospel. This included sharing among the Orthodox and Muslim communities and those who practice witchcraft. One of the noted advantages of the method was that it is flexible enough to be adapted to a variety of settings. Participants reported telling stories at coffee ceremonies, funerals, along the road, and societal events, including the elder meetings of one village where they were used to mediate conflict. Megavoices were used by many participants to bring recordings of the Bible stories to evangelize the lost in distance areas that were difficult to reach and leave them with a oral copies of scripture.

Orality

A number of participants identified themselves explicitly as oral learners regardless of whether they were literate or not. This included references to the whole community as an oral culture that preferred the means of communication identified as oral. The theoretical construct of orality seems to have been embraced as a helpful explanation for profound incongruities that the members of these communities have felt as they engaged educational models brought by the West to serve their communities of faith.

Oral Versus Literate Methods

A major theme that emerged within the orality theme was direct comparisons between traditional, highly literate methods of teaching and the oral strategy of storytelling. Participants consistently articulated a variety of ways that the methods employed in the Bible colleges and churches did not communicate learning in a manner that the participants could fully comprehend or utilize. One participant acknowledged doing as much as necessary to pass the exams and make it through the assignments, but contrasted this with the storytelling method as something that was "helping to study God's word itself." A number of participants from the Oral Bible Schools expressed their sense of deep inadequacy when they attempted to develop lessons or sermons that they had learned from the church or formal Bible colleges. These seemed to consist of topical sermons or those based on the categories of systematic theology that drew passages from

all over the biblical text in order to support the point of the lesson. Another participant explained that the prior teaching of the church in terms of the sermon produced members that acted as Christians in name only. When the Oral Bible School graduates returned from the school, the teaching model changed and the parishioners began to learn things that significantly strengthened their spiritual journeys. Across the board, the participants expressed affect-laden gratitude and relief to have been given a method that resonated with their culture and could be meaningfully embraced by all of its members for significant learning and transformation.

The Resonance of Orality

There were a number of aspects of the STS method that were identified as being particularly helpful for oral learners. Internalizing the stories through memorization was often identified as the primary game-changer. The use of narratives and group discussion were expressed as natural, non-threatening ways to learn. Several explained that this was in part due to the assurance that came with identifying the critical spiritual insights and applications of the narratives in a community setting where they could bring correction to each other, come to agreement, and appeal to leaders. Others explained that the modeling of the storytelling process, including repeated practice of the questions, was helpful. Some of the participants explained that because the model resonated with their culture, it could be easily integrated into the community's existing social patterns as a positive new addition that provided engaging things to talk about. Moreover, both the educated and non-educated members of oral cultures were able to learn together, engaging the dialog as equals with valuable insights to contribute.

Discussion

There seemed to be a complex of interdependent interactions that contributed to the effectiveness of the STS model in terms of providing discipleship and training for the members of the denominations in Ethiopia. The chief quality that stood behind the effectiveness of each factor was that they represented the modes of orality. This made the learning process accessible to the uneducated and gave it a resonance that went beyond the mere ability to comprehend a lesson. The use of narratives, the harboring of them in their minds, and the in-depth discussion in community were each described in a manner that resembled descriptions of important events or moments in time when one's imagination was captured or one's vision was transformed. These events and the lessons that came with them seemed to take on a form of symbolic power for the participants that they could immediately reference as significant guideposts for understanding and behavior in daily life. The foundational step for this was the process of memorizing the stories.

The need to memorize the story was built into the emphasis of the pedagogy and therefore became a natural, unquestioned, critical step for mastery. The method made this possible by being realistic: (1) the stories were kept short; (2) space was created within the lesson for memorization by having three stages devoted to it; (3) these three stages engaged three different techniques for memorization (seeing it dramatized, individual audience members retelling of the story in groups, group retelling of the story together).

The use of the genre of narrative as the central focus for learning seemed to be critical as a natural, innate paradigm by which to understand complex concepts and to engage biblical truth on deeply affective and cognitive levels. The use of a memorable, formulaic set of questions enabled the participants to explore the narrative structure and the characters in an in-depth manner, provoking insightful and empathetic connections to the characters, including the character of God. The biblical stories realistically depicted challenges of life that were similar to those faced by the participants (such as the reality of human sin, the struggle to have faith, family problems, abuse of power, the suffering of poverty, etc.), yet from the perspective of God's inspired authors, allowing for a dependable testimony of truth that the participants could rely upon for critical reflection as they processed their own challenges. The rich depictions of redemption seemed engender deeper, more complex understanding of God's grace that had the power to convince the participants that it was available for them as well. Meanwhile, the illustrations of characters responding in righteous relationship to God functioned as a form of modeled discipleship. The participants related to the characters as spiritual heirs and family, heroes to be emulated and loved. The pervasive themes of redemption and righteousness in the biblical text were employed to reinterpret faulty, existing interpretations in order to build a more biblical understanding of their world with God's faithfulness at the center.

The process of group discussion cultivated an atmosphere of communal learning, creating an opportunity for the participants to give voice to their insights in an emotionally safe and supportive environment. This, along with the evident richness of their insights and their confidence in their ability to communicate the stories, seems to have worked together to engender a sense of assurance that led to boldness and active engagement of the method. The ongoing expression of expectations by the leaders that this training would lead to effective teaching and evangelism seemed to support a vision of evangelism for a number of the participants. It sent a message to the learners that their leaders believed in their ability to take on new roles and responsibilities in the community and that they were ready to set aside time and resources to equip them. It got the discussion going about the need to train non-literates, which in turn communicated their value and belonging to their community.

The participants demonstrated that they were intrinsically motivated by the rewards of personal spiritual growth as well as the development of new, highly effective skills that helped them contribute meaningfully to their community. The adaptability of the model (ranging from simply telling the story to intensive, inductive Bible study) allowed for its application in numerous contexts, such as: personal and family devotions, church, small groups, youth programs, at elder councils, and with various forms of evangelism. This diversity created many opportunities to practice the method and for the community at large to learn it and embrace it.

Challenges

A number of participants noted that learning the Spiritual Observation questions was quite challenging and that more support in that learning process was necessary. Moreover, moving effectively through the stages could seem daunting, particularly at first. These comments were generally made in areas where there the local leaders had less training and time to practice and absorb the method. This indicates that a critical aspect of the method is to establish mastery in the initial leaders so that their subsequent training of others will be effective. Another comment that emerged independently from two participants regarding one particular Oral Bible

School was that it is critical for the leaders to forgo their positions of status to dominate the process and instead use their influence to foster an atmosphere of mutuality and respect. What is remarkable is how rare this sort of comment was in the data and the manner in which the vast majority of leaders and the method itself effectively created a positive, supportive of environment for all its members.

While there were a certain amount of stories related to evangelism and passing on the skill to others, with the exception of a few cases, this theme did not have the dominance one would expect if one was hoping for the immediate replication and multiplication sought by oral strategists. The degree to which evangelism was engaged was often directly related to the amount of emphasis and energy that the local leaders invested in the use of the STS method for their congregation and the levels of support and encouragement the participants received.³³ Where emphasis and energy for implementation ran high, there was a communal synergy that seemed to lead to exponential growth in the participants and outward expression of faith in teaching and evangelism. Where this level of implementation did not exist, the method seemed to function more like a useful pedagogy.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate the effectiveness of the Simply the Story method as an oral strategy for discipling oral learners and proclamation of the Gospel in Ethiopia. In this context, it was used by indigenous denominations with flourishing churches to equip the saints in terms of discipleship and evangelism. The ministry took place in a community where a large proportion of the people (including members of the Orthodox church) have some familiarity with the biblical text and ascribe authority to it. There were also a number of testimonies regarding the reception of the stories by members of the Muslim community and those involved with witchcraft. In spite of these testimonies, the outcomes of the method fall somewhat short of missiological expectations of rapid, exponential multiplication, replication of the skill, and the planting of new churches. This seems to have been related to the goals of the leaders as they implemented the program.

However, the method seems to be accomplishing something of profound importance nonetheless. Discipleship and leadership training have been identified as major concerns for the church in sub-Saharan Africa.³⁴ The STS method seems to not only teach a skill about telling Bible stories for proclaiming the Gospel, it provokes richly engaged levels of transformation and intensive training for interpretation of scripture. This created highly prized results in the Body of Christ, such as: the formation of deep, mutual love among its members, elevation of the marginalized to meaningful and effective roles in the community, and equipping the saints with a deep love for and significant skills in the study of scripture. In terms of oral strategies, this indicates that when the storytelling method is engaged more intentionally for proclamation and church planting, the strategy will not only be effective for bringing salvation to the lost but for cultivating the spiritual vitality of young churches. The method that brought the message of the Gospel might prove to be effective for long-term issues of developing leadership, bonding the community of Christ together, and equipping them for a faithful life.

³³ Bamlaku Dessie, an Oral Bible School graduate and pastor in northern Ethiopia, suggested that the key to the success of the OBSs is the level of commitment by the leadership

³⁴ Jason Mandryk, *Operation World*, 36-37.

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