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We've a Story to Tell to the Nations

Once upon a time, our parents, teachers, and others told us stories. Some of these stories were just for fun. Others filled our minds with new ideas and shaped our identities with moral, cultural, and religious concepts and ideals and thus supplied the context for how we understand the way the world works and how we fit into it. This is true whether we were nurtured on Aesop's fables, the tales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Anderson, the legends of Chang E, Pangu, and the Monkey King, or the narratives of the Bible. The stories we share with others enhance our social solidarity with them, while unfamiliar tales separate us from the people who were moulded by them. More importantly, our engagement with the biblical story makes it possible for of us to be reconciled with God and with each other, no matter how we have been shaped by other stories.

This issue of Mission Round Table addresses the place of story in our lives and our proclamation of the gospel. A glance at the table of contents shows that a sizeable amount of space has been given to discussions of orality and textuality. While some readers will find these words familiar, as they have been used in media and communication studies for upwards of three decades, others will be encountering them for the first time and possibly find them objectionable simply because they are new. For the newbies out there, let me say that orality is simply a focus on oral communication, and that some proponents link it to a person’s preference to use spoken instead of written language. Textuality (or literacy), by contrast, highlights written communication. Unfortunately, orality and textuality are at times dichotomized so that one’s preference for using one or the other comes across as “a competition between eye and ear.”¹ But let’s face it, even most literate people mainly communicate orally. Walter Ong is thus right to observe that it is “inescapably obvious that language is an oral phenomenon.”² Even those of us who revel in the printed word love to hear stories as much as the next person.

What is it about stories that we find so gripping? In part, it is their description of the human condition. Whether based on a historical incident or entirely composed in the mind of the teller, a good story speaks to our basic needs as humans. This explains why our self-understanding is often grounded in stories and why they supply the foundations for our ethical and religious ideas. It also explains why story is such a valuable means of sharing the gospel and nurturing people in the life of faith. There is a sense in which telling the old, old story again and again enables both tellers and listeners to have their thought lives and their actions penetrated and guided by the one grand story of Jesus and his love. The more we rightly encounter the story, the more it informs our worldview and unites us with the God of the story.

As some of the following articles make clear, it is essential that we tell this story in a way that is understandable to our listeners. And though the words of the biblical story do not change, the way our listeners hear the words can vary greatly. As illustrated on our cover, the peoples of Asia come from a wide range of backgrounds and embrace a multitude of worldviews. Some are religious and

Editorial continued on page 34.

John Casto holds a poster while Songkram, a lay leader of the Nong Chang church in Thailand, presents the gospel to attentive listeners. East Asia’s Millions (Nov 1974): 108.
You want to make the Bible come alive? I didn’t know it had died. In fact, I had never even heard that it was ill. Who was the attending physician at the Bible’s demise? No, I can’t make the Bible come alive for anyone. The Bible is already alive. It makes me come alive.
— R. C. Sproul¹

Chronological Bible Storying is changing Christian communication forever. Emphasis on oral learning preferences is the next wave of missions advance … the beloved “three points and a poem” is dead; long live the chronological narrative!
— Mark Snowden²

Introduction
The feisty remarks above from R. C. Sproul and Mark Snowden share a passion to redeem the stereotype of the Bible as a dead book. Yet their proposals for recovering the dynamism of God’s living Word are rather different. Sproul, being a theologian of traditional persuasion, emphasizes that the textuality of the Bible demands renewed commitment to reading and studying the Scriptures as God’s written word. By contrast, Snowden is a missiologist who seeks to replace traditional methods of pedagogy with the newer practice of storying—skilled performance of God’s oral word.

The purpose of offering these quotations is not to broaden the existing divide between advocates of textuality and orality, lesser still the proverbial gap between theology and missiology. I seek instead to reexamine certain assumptions about the Bible that underlie how advocates of textuality and orality methods seek scriptural support for their views. Rather than pitting these modes of communication against each other in anachronistic ways, as is sometimes done, it is necessary to understand how they reinforce each other as a symbiosis in the Bible itself. As David Carr comments in this regard, “[S]ocieties with writing often have an intricate interplay of orality and textuality, where written texts are intensely oral, while even exclusively oral texts are deeply affected by written culture.”³ That is to say, the Bible is God’s oral address to his people which has been preserved for future generations as a written text. The need to hear and heed these words continually finds support in the Bible’s many directives to memorize them, meditate upon them, and read them aloud—a rich combination of tasks that necessarily taps into orality and textuality as complementary dimensions of human experience.

The article will proceed in three sections. Part I will survey the diverse kinds of orality contained in the Bible’s literary forms. The oral character of the Bible is found not just in narrative texts, but also in usually overlooked genres such as law, prophecy/apocalypse, epistle, and wisdom. Part II will explore the broader question of why the spoken nature of God’s address has come down to us in written form. These observations about the nature of the Bible will afford an opportunity for Part III to evaluate the role that literacy has played in ancient and modern cultures. Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, among many others, have been influential in arguing that much of the world lies beyond the reach of the “Gutenberg Galaxy.”⁴ There is much truth to this view, as attested in the rest of the articles in this issue of MRT. I will also propose, however, that the methods of orality and textuality ought to remain partners in mission since the Bible was always intended by God to leap off the page and arrest its audience in a personal encounter which includes both hearing and reading.⁵

I. The Orality (?) of the Bible
Any discussion of orality must begin with the recognition that the majority of the Bible is prose narrative. The OT begins with an unbroken story from creation (Genesis) all the way until Israel’s post-exilic period (Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther). Statistically speaking, books that are mostly narrative represent about 50% of the OT. This figure is mirrored by the fact that the narratives of the four Gospels and Acts compose approximately 55% of the NT. As many advocates of orality- and story-based methods rightly

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⁵ The author acknowledges the helpful comments of a previous version of this article which was presented at the 2015 SBC Annual Meeting. The author thanks the referees for their insightful feedback and suggestions which have been incorporated into the final version.
Two issues arise, though, when the Bible’s abundance of narrative is offered as evidence that storytelling is the Bible’s main method of propagating itself. The first and more obvious issue is that the textuality of the Bible remains inescapable as a big book composed of sixty-six smaller books. Any proposal emphasizing Scripture’s own orality still needs to reckon with how its traditions have also been transmitted by written media and more than (though never less than) oral retelling. Indeed, the textuality of the Bible as preserver of its orality is predicated upon a second and more fundamental question—to what extent are oral traditions part of the fabric of the Bible itself? By limiting the discussion to narratives, especially the Bible’s pithier stories, advocates of orality methods seem to underestimate the extent to which the Bible in its entirety could support their case. In short, it is not merely the Bible’s shorter stories that were geared toward oral recitation for audiences that preferred hearing to reading, but also its longer stories, laws, prophecies, and wisdom literature.

The Bible’s shorter stories originated in an oral setting. Before Israel has even departed from Egypt, to name just one instance, Moses looks ahead to the Promised Land when parents must retell the exodus story to their children: “When you enter the land that the Lord will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians’” (Exod 12:25–27 NIV, italics added). Especially fascinating in this explanation of Passover is that Israel’s dwellings in Egypt are both “the houses of the Israelites” and “our homes,” even though a generation born in Canaan would have never lived in Egypt. Chronological precision becomes less important than transporting both the audience and their descendants back to Egypt, much like the imagined conversation between father and son in Deut 6:20–25. In these OT passages as well as in Judaism more generally, dead and living generations are joined as God’s singular people by addressing everyone in Israel’s history as “we/us” (e.g., Deut 5:3).

By way of corollary, the genre of OT law also builds upon the oral delivery of a short story. Later in Exodus, God declares that the story of Israel’s deliverance is of higher priority than the laws to be given: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exod 20:2 NIV). It is not Moses who speaks here but the Lord himself (compare Cecil B. DeMille’s 1956 famous film, The Ten Commandments). The laws following this declaration are therefore Israel’s grateful response to deliverance rather than a legalistic means of earning it. These laws are not only grounded in a story of salvation—a feature unique to Israel’s literature—but the legal codes of the OT are distinctly personal for addressing a second-person audience of “you” (e.g., Exod 20:3–17; Deut 5:6–21). Judicial codes from elsewhere in the ancient world, as in the laws of Hammurabi the Babylonian king, are promulgated impersonally from a human ruler to third-person citizens identified as “he/they.” In short, Israel is privileged among the nations to receive laws to “you” that are directly from the King of the universe and set within the old, old story of how he saved “you.”

While the power of retelling shorter stories (e.g., Jesus’ parables) has been generally recognized, the more recent emergence of performance criticism has also shown that longer sections of text were also meant to be recounted orally, both in narrative books taken as a whole and the non-narrative genres of prophecy/apocalypse, epistle, and wisdom. For biblical narratives, the NT books of Mark and Acts have received particular attention in how their authors likely intended them as oral performances or perhaps even dramatizations which interacted with their original audiences. Among the prophetic/apocalyptic books, Jeremiah is representative in how the prophet’s words first assume the form of spoken oracles from God to the peoples and their kings (Jer 7; 25–26) before later becoming a text with the help of Baruch the scribe (Jer 36:1–3), yet become spoken addresses again when Baruch’s brother Seraiah takes a scroll of the oracles against Babylon (50:1–51:58) to read publicly there as a sign of its impending fall (51:59–64). The apocalyptic book of Revelation is similar in recording oral addresses that are later written down (Rev 1:3, 11, 19), as well as adopting the form of a circular letter which was to be read aloud to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2–3).

Besides the book of Revelation, the bidirectional relationship between written text and oral event is also found in other familiar specimens of the Greco-Roman epistolary form—the letters of the NT that Paul, Peter, and other writers sent via couriers to read aloud before the congregations of the early church (e.g., Acts 15:31; Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27). As a final example on the primacy of aural learning in the Bible’s world, the wisdom sayings in Proverbs repeatedly command the audience to “hear!” (e.g., 1:8; 4:1; 22:17). These calls to virtue are set in the context of everyday family life, whether directly as a summons from a male authority figure to younger charges to “listen!” (e.g., 5:7), or indirectly when wisdom and folly are personified as women who “call out” (9:3, 15) to impressionable young men and invite them into their respective houses (9:4–6, 16–18).
In this respect, recent NT scholarship has moved away from the anachronistic view that the Gospels were composed primarily as written texts for a particular church or community. Instead, several converging lines of evidence show that the Gospels were widely circulated as interlocking oral and written traditions among Christian assemblies in different places.

Wisdom sayings of Proverbs certainly become a written text at some point in their transmission through history (25:1), but the focus of the book remains on inscribing its poetry “on the tablet of your heart” (3:3; 7:3) as words to be memorized, recited, and cherished.99

These observations across different biblical genres illustrate that orality is part and parcel of the written Bible. Given how the Bible evidently reflects the ancient preference for oral communication and learning by hearing,20 the question inevitably becomes one of how and why Jews and Christians came to be “people of the book.” The next section will address this issue in light of the modern assertion that written texts are becoming increasingly passé, the Bible most importantly among them.

II. The Textuality of Orality and the Orality of Textuality

On one level the reasons why texts exist are self-evident. Much like advocates of orality methods still use print media to disseminate their ideas rather than only discussing them face-to-face, the Bible also seeks to speak broadly as God’s revelation to the whole world. Beyond this truism about mass communication, however, the Bible records two other factors that led to oral sayings becoming written texts at certain historical junctures. These factors are not exclusive of one another and indeed worked together when in-person transmission proved to be inadequate for keeping alive these precious traditions. Put another way, one could summarize that the written production of the Bible was intended to preserve and reinforce its orality as a text to be continuously heard by all peoples.

The first reason for textualizing the Bible was that the continuity of oral traditions was threatened when their gatekeepers began to depart from the scene. This could happen through the death of a scribal figure such as Moses, whose impending death led him to transcribe his farewell sermons in Deuteronomy and entrust them to the Levitical priests who would recite them every seventh year at the Feast of Tabernacles (Deut 31:9–13). The transmitter’s death did not need to be imminent, however, for the threat of opposition to a scribe or prophetic figure would have also been a sufficient impetus for textualizing oral traditions. When the original scroll of Jeremiah’s words is read to King Jehoiakim, who then casts them into the fire, the Lord commands Jeremiah to dictate another scroll which contains additional words against the king (Jer 36:21–32). Along the same lines, the writers of the four Gospels produced their books so that a newer generation of Christians would still have access to the words and deeds of Jesus after the eyewitnesses to his life were imprisoned or had passed on.21 In this regard, the gap of several centuries between the earthly ministry of Jesus (~30–33 AD) and the writing of the Gospels (~65–95 AD) is not evidence that traditions about Jesus were corrupted or even invented by the early Christians, as skeptics think, but testifies instead to the dominance of oral traditions about Jesus in a cultural climate that preferred hearing to reading and writing. In this respect, recent NT scholarship has moved away from the anachronistic view that the Gospels were composed primarily as written texts for a particular church or community. Instead, several converging lines of evidence show that the Gospels were widely circulated as interlocking oral and written traditions among Christian assemblies in different places.22

The other reason for the Bible becoming a book lies in the need for oral traditions to travel where human speakers cannot. Texts can more easily cross physical borders, such as when the prophet Jeremiah is forbidden to enter the Temple and palace in Jerusalem where his words are to be proclaimed (Jer 36:1–8). Or to cite a NT example, the Apostle Paul writes letters both from prison where his movements are restricted (e.g., Philippians) or while on the move to address a Christian community he is unable to visit at that moment (e.g., Romans). The borders favoring the mobility of written texts over authoritative storytellers may also be more than physical, just as migrants who cross languages and cultures quickly sense the need for new, vernacular expressions of old traditions.

Evidence for this sort of cross-cultural movement can be seen in the physical migration of the Jews to exile going together with a shift in their language from Hebrew to Aramaic, the language of Babylon. Even after some Jews returned from exile, the book of Nehemiah records a fascinating scene in Jerusalem when Ezra’s public reading of the OT law is accompanied by Levites who offered simultaneous translation and explanation in Aramaic for those who apparently could not understand the original Hebrew (Neh 8:1–8).23 This change to Aramaic as the heart language of the people also extends to the production of biblical texts, for several post-exilic books contain Aramaic sections which use this lingua franca to confront the world with the sovereignty of Israel’s God (e.g., Dan 2:4b–7:28). Similarly, the later move from Aramaic to Greek in the fourth century BC results not only in the translation of the OT into Greek (known as the Septuagint), but also paves the way for the NT’s eventual spread from Palestine to the broader Hellenistic world, quite literally on the backs of Greek-speaking Christians during the first century AD.24
III. Orality, Textuality, and Literacy

The close relationship between orality and textuality in the Bible leads necessarily to questions about the extent of literacy in the biblical world—who would possess the skills to harness the synergy between God’s spoken and written words? Following McLuhan’s lead, advocates of orality methods tend to assert that literacy was uncommon in ancient times. This leads to the implication, sometimes unstated, that the task of reading and writing texts is reserved for a gifted, educated elite (whether then or now). As a matter of method, it is imperative to understand the manner in which the Bible characterizes itself as a text to be read. Modern people usually associate reading with the silent act of opening a printed book, but the task of reading in biblical times always involved the audible recitation of a written text. This cultural given can especially be seen in the verbs that denote reading in Hebrew and Greek. The operative verbs are Hebrew qārā’ and its Greek counterpart anaginōskō, both of which primarily mean “to call out” or “to cry out.” It would be anachronistic to understand the OT reference to “reading” the law on the part of Israel’s king (Deut 17:19) or the NT reference to the Ethiopian eunuch “reading” the scroll of Isaiah (Acts 8:28) as anything other than an oral recitation. The modern practice of silent reading was quite rare until the Middle Ages, more than a millennium after the NT period. Reading texts was therefore of less value than hearing them, and the Bible consistently reflects such a cultural milieu by being written more for the ear than the eye.

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This is not to minimize the enormous contributions of Bible translators in modern times who work closely with literacy specialists to create written languages and Bibles for pre-literate peoples. It appears, however, that the concept of “literacy” in the cultural environment of the Bible is not primarily the ability to read and write a given language. This insight is not as foreign as it might seem to modern people, just as the English idiom “biblical literacy” relates more to how well the Bible has been learned by heart and expressed in life than the basic cognitive skills required to read in the first place. And given how the communally oriented world of the Bible (not to mention much of the Majority World today) typically expected these texts to be recited in a public forum, one might add that “biblical literacy” in the truest sense entails how well the community of faith as a whole displays living proof of internalizing the Bible, rather than how well an individual can decode the words of the Bible in isolation from others.

That being said, the modern concept of literacy can remain a useful bridge between oral and textual modes of communication. It is no accident that the major developmental periods for the Bible’s individual books occurred at moments when the ability to read increased significantly among the general populace or when a new lingua franca was adopted. For example, the dawn of biblical literature in the age of the patriarchs and Moses during the second millennium BC coincided with the revolutionary change from the extremely complex writing systems of Babylonian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs to the much simpler alphabetic script of Hebrew and other Semitic languages. Cuneiform and hieroglyphs both required the memorization of hundreds of signs, restricting mastery of languages using these systems to a select group of royally educated scribes. By contrast, the Hebrew alphabet only has twenty-two letters and can be learned rather quickly, a technological breakthrough which facilitated the production of the Hebrew Bible and the corresponding rise of a class of common people in Israel as its readers. As noted in the previous section, much the same can be said about the arrival of Aramaic and Greek in biblical history, for it was at such times that the other nations of the world were surprised to hear the God of Israel addressing them directly in their own languages (e.g., Jer 10:11 [in Aramaic], and Acts 2:4 [in all the languages of the Jewish diaspora]).

Taking their cues from how the Bible interposes itself across textuality and orality, wise theologians and missionaries will instead perceive both dimensions of God’s living truth, since fixating on one medium to the exclusion of the other can only result in the need to “rescue” the Bible from limitations of the interpreter’s own making.
Conclusion
The Bible does not force us to choose between orality and textuality. Instead, the Old and New Testaments address the whole person and community of faith—both head and heart—through a combination of oral and textual methods. The Bible's holistic strategy for communication overcomes the modern dichotomy between textuality and orality which stems from an inadequate grasp of how they always relate to each other in dynamic ways.

In summary, spiritual transformation is not the unique contribution of orality methods; nor does the textuality of the Bible necessarily provide a superior medium for God's objective truth to which oral learners will typically lack access. Taking their cues from how the Bible interposes itself across textuality and orality, wise theologians and missionaries will instead perceive both dimensions of God's living truth, since fixating on one medium to the exclusion of the other can only result in the need to “rescue” the Bible from limitations of the interpreter's own making.

NOTES
5 This both-and approach is also embraced by the International Orality Network in their book, Making Disciples of Oral Learners (Bangalore: ION/LCWE, 2005), 11–12.
6 Genesis—Esther are a continuous sequence of books in Protestant Bibles which occupies about 52% of the total page count of the OT. Since this section is not entirely narrative but there are narrative texts in other sections of the OT (e.g., Jonah, Daniel), I propose that the proportion of narrative in the OT is roughly 50%.
7 See for example, Graham Johnston, Preaching to a Postmodern World: A Guide to Reaching Twenty-First-Century Listeners (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2001); Richard A. Jensen, Telling the Story: Variety and Imagination in Preaching (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980).
8 Scot McKnight, The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).
9 As suggested by, for example, Paul F. Koehler, Telling God’s Stories with Power: Biblical Storytelling in Oral Cultures (Pasadena: William Carey, 2010), 29; Michael Novelli, Shaped by the Story: Helping Students Encounter God in a New Way (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 18.
14 See for example, Gary M. Burge, Jesus, The Middle Eastern Storyteller: Uncover the Ancient Culture, Discover Hidden Meanings (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).
15 The main works in performance criticism are published by Cascade Books (Eugene, OR) as part of an ongoing series, “Biblical Performance Criticism: Orality, Memory, Translation, Rhetoric, Discourse.”
22 Dunn, “Altering the Default Setting”;
26 For example, Koehn, Telling God’s Stories with Power, 28.
27 See discussion of these power dynamics in literacy by James A. Maxey, From Orality to Orality: A New Paradigm for Contextual Translation of the Bible, Biblical Performance Criticism 2 (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 80–82.
29 For a complete history of silent reading, see Paul Saenger, Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading (Stanford: CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).
30 The most prominent example being Cameron Townsend’s pioneering work through Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Summer Institute of Linguistics.
31 Compare the two to posit a linear development from orality to textuality and literacy by Ong, Orality and Literacy.
32 This kind is perhaps realized in the subtitle to the International Orality Network’s most recent book, Orality Breakouts: Using Heart Language to Transform Hearts (Hong Kong: ION/LCWE, 2010).
Resources for Gospel Storytelling

**BTStories** is the site of master storyteller John Walsh who has compiled 260 Bible stories that can be told in about five minutes each. www.btstories.com

**Chiang Mai Orality Network** is Larry Dinkins’s collection of articles, media presentations, and other resources on storytelling, some of which are in Thai. www.chiang-mai-orality.net

Since 1939, **Gospel Recordings Network (GRN)** has produced audio and video recordings for evangelism and Bible teaching in close to 6000 languages. Recordings can be downloaded free of charge and passed on through email, Bluetooth, and other media. globalrecordings.net/en/

The **International Orality Network (ION)** produces the journal *Orality* and many other resources for communicating the gospel with primarily oral audiences. www.orality.net

The “Jesus” **Film Project** features a movie based on Luke’s Gospel that has been dubbed into more than 1300 languages and has impacted millions all over the world. www.jesusfilm.org

**Orality Strategies** is the Southern Baptist International Mission Board (IMB) website explaining what orality is and how one can be prepared to share their faith in oral contexts. orality.imb.org

**Resonance Drama** is a ministry of WEC that aims to help Christians experience, learn, use, and teach dramatic arts in a culturally relevant manner. Their workshops can be taught in English, German, Dutch, and Mongolian. www.resonancearts.net/drama-home.html

**Simply the Story** is a program designed to train people how to tell Bible stories so that both they and their listeners can discover its truths for themselves. www.simplythestory.org

**Story4All** provides materials and training so that the “oral two thirds” of the world can hear and grasp the good news about Jesus through story, drama, song, and other oral means. story4all.com

**Storying the Scriptures** is the site developed by Christine Dillon so that the story of Jesus might be passed on to people who (1) don’t yet know but want to learn the story, (2) have heard something about storying and want to know more, or (3) are more experienced storytellers who want to develop their skills. In addition to English, material is supplied in Chinese (traditional and simplified characters) and Italian. www.storyingthescriptures.com
Orality Praxis in Discipleship and Church Planting

Introduction
In 1993, after a dozen years of church planting and seminary teaching in Thailand, OMF leadership encouraged me to pursue a doctorate in inter-cultural education in order to advance my skills and give more credibility to the seminary program. The academic challenge was stimulating, yet my main desire was to use this opportunity to gain answers to recurring questions I had about the slow growth of the church. After 175 years of missionary presence in the country, Christians still made up less than 1% of the population. Seven years and more than 200 pages later I turned in my dissertation. I had hoped that my goal of adapting a Western teaching tool to the Thai context would be confirmed and adopted by the Thai. That dream never materialized. Even so, I gained a major insight into the learning style of my target people group—at their core the Thai were preferred oral learners.

The weight of this discovery did not sink in until I attended a full five-day oral Bible story workshop in which no notes could be taken. An opportunity to receive a certificate for completion of the course was offered on the last day by presenting a model story to the participants. Suffice to say, my feeble attempt at telling and unpacking an orally-told Bible story failed miserably and the certificate was withheld from my grasp—my literate paradigm was way too evident in my presentation.

Up to that point I had taught the Thai with highly analytical methods based on a literate text paradigm. The subsequent paradigm shift was wrenching at times and was so significant that I chronicled my journey in an article entitled, “My Bumpy Road to Orality.” What followed was a two-year span of time in which I traveled to nine Asian countries doing nothing but oral trainings. After such a broad exposure I can now echo the sentiments of Harry Box who concludes his book, Don’t Throw the Book at Them with these words:

The great majority of people in the world today are oral communicators. This number includes many who have received some kind of literacy training or formal education, but who prefer to be oral communicators and so have not maintained their literacy skills. In spite of the extensive literacy programs as well as the formal and informal education systems around the world the number of oral communicators is steadily increasing. The highest percentage of oral communicators is in the developing countries of the world, which also have the highest percentage of people who have yet to receive a clear presentation of the Christian message.

The great majority of Asian unreached people groups (UPGs) easily fit into the above description. With that in mind, the next question should be: How can we prepare disciplers and church planters who have been trained in highly literate methods to relate effectively with non-literate or preferred oral learners in cross-cultural contexts?
Primary and Secondary Orality

It is not difficult to make a case for a truly oral approach when referring to non-literate or semi-non-literate. Concrete-relational, event oriented people gravitate towards holistic and oral communication. Pure illiterates, who can neither read nor write, need to start with the concrete and move to more abstract concepts. A minority of our world falls into this category and yet they should remain a priority target group as we seek to fulfill the Great Commission.

A much larger slice of the globe falls into the category of preferred oral learners (POL). Though they have had some education and have the ability to read, a lack of usage or incentive means that they end up as either functionally non-literate or semi-non-literate. The Lausanne paper, “Making Disciples of Oral Learners,” gives a helpful summary of the effects of such low literacy in the USA through an analysis of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS).

If half of American adults are in the lowest levels of literacy, what should we expect in the developing nations of Asia where there are fewer educational opportunities for education?

Harry Box highlights for us the differences in literate learners and oral learners, whether primary or preferred:

There is a marked contrast between the worldview characteristics of oral communicators and literacy-oriented people. This is not simply at a superficial, surface level, but rather at a deep worldview level and is particularly significant in the whole area of communication.

To move from an oral worldview position to a literacy-oriented worldview position, or vice versa, requires a major worldview shift.

Such a shift is no less needed for a group which we increasingly encounter in our media saturated age—secondary oral learners. With the advent of the internet and a multitude of readily accessible electronic devices we have ended up with a postmodern generation of browsers and scanners who spend most of their day viewing various screens replete with pull down menus, video clips with highly kinetic, visual as well as sensory graphics. This digit-oral generation is increasingly replacing the written word with audio clips, television, virtual reality, and social media. Media producers recognize that we are all hard-wired to stories, which is why you see a proliferation of narrative genre on YouTube, television sitcoms, and the standard fare we find in movies. My daughter’s college roommate well illustrates the connection between young people and screen-sourced narratives as she watched ninety movies during a ninety-day span over one summer.

The cumulative effect of such massive doses of media is reflected in the declining reading habits of the American adult population of which nearly a quarter had not even read one book during the past year. If reading habits in the West are declining at such a rate, one can only imagine where developing nations will end up as this electronic media trend continues.

We should not view the use of literacy and orality as “either-or,” but “both-and.” A master carpenter needs a variety of tools in his tool belt. Traditionally, the communication tool belt of educators and trainers in Asia has been weighted with text-dominated literate tools emphasizing western theology, propositional truths, and linear/logical thought processes. We will always need such tools, especially when we are covering the details and principles of the Word found in epistolarly or more didactic genres. Different genres require different tools so that God’s word can be interpreted, applied, and communicated properly.

Paul was careful to teach “the whole counsel of God” in various ways (Acts 20:27). His example reminds us that propositional truths and narrative stories need each other.

Jesus modeled balance in his communication, using both sermonic discourses as well as numerous stories. There were times when he taught in a more direct propositional manner, yet the bulk of his teaching was parabolic as seen by the parables in the Gospel of Luke which make up more than half of the book. J. M. Price observes, “Undoubtedly the distinctive method used by the Master was the parable or story. It stands out more prominently in his teaching than any other.” Matthew’s Gospel states, “All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parable, indeed he said nothing to them without a parable” (13:34). Jesus was a master communicator and as such consistently packaged truth in a story form for use with non-literate as well as highly educated Jewish leaders.
Our strong suit as missionaries has always been literate tools and I expect them to predominate on into the future. We all appreciate the massive effort expended over the centuries to produce and preserve the printed Bible and all of the resources related to it. Yet in the process we seem to have depreciated the Bible in oral forms and have failed to adequately meet the needs of the majority that do not prefer the printed page.

Bringing Stories to Life

Oral cultures are experiential, sensory, and holistic in nature. Oral learners flesh out meaning, rather than trying to explain it abstractly or logically. Different cultures gravitate to different art forms. Whatever the art form, it is important to make sure that they supplement and support the core of the teaching, which is the Bible story itself.

Contextualized Songs, Poems, and Chants

Songs have a phenomenal sticking power and can be retained over decades. Understandable and contextualized songs can work in tandem with the story to seal the message to both the heart and mind of the hearer. Avery Willis had his trainees tell the story, dialogue about it, act it out, and finally work on creating a song, since “Music touches the emotions. If you are involved in creating a song, you will likely remember the story better. If the song has a catchy tune, you will sing it during the following week, and it will help you recall the main point of the story.” Certain cultures are particularly touched by poetry. An example of this comes from Russia where I witnessed a young girl recite a very long biblically-themed poem from the pulpit, totally from memory. In Thai culture chanting is a common form which I have made use of in church by having the whole congregation recite key phrases after me. Since this is a practice they have all utilized since childhood it is easy for them to transfer the practice to church.

Drama and Dance

John Davis portrays drama as the communication key for the Thai. “To effectively communicate the message it needs to be packaged in a medium that will be culturally acceptable. For Thai this medium is drama. There seems to be no other means of communication which makes such a powerful impact on Thai audiences as the dramatic arts.” The Thai use their innate acting talents in both drama and music in an entertainment form using extravagant costumes and improvisation called Likay.

This tendency to improvise extends to dramas performed in church, so that in our story training we have resorted to having a single narrator tell the story slowly as the drama troupe performs the story through a silent pantomime. In this way the story is clearly featured, rather than trying to have the actors memorize their lines, which can easily degenerate into a comedy routine that may blur the story line. The Thai are also graceful and expressive dancers, especially with their hands. Many churches use this natural gifting during festival times and special dates in the Christian calendar.

Proverbs and Cultural Stories

Like most Asian cultures, Thailand is replete with proverbs and pithy sayings, many of which have similar meanings to biblical proverbs. Such succinct adages are easily remembered and can be easily incorporated into evangelism and discipleship. Since the majority of Thai are Buddhist, it is helpful to be familiar with a few religious stories, which can be used as bridges in pre-evangelism. In the book, From Buddha to Jesus, Cioccolanti suggests familiarity with stories like “The Blind Turtle” and others to show the relation of sin to karma.

Art and Object Lessons

It has been said that “A picture is worth a thousand words; a story is worth a thousand pictures.” Stylistic drawings with Christian themes have been used effectively to build bridges of communication with Buddhists in Thailand. There are full sets of such drawings based on Bible story sets. I personally like a more biblically accurate set developed by the Southern Baptists in the Philippines. A missionary I know takes fellow artists to a university campus and as the artists set up their easels and draw biblical scenes, he tells the story being drawn to Thai onlookers. A creative use of object lessons can also supplement a story. I have cut out of cardboard a simple four piece object lesson which I have used with over 1,000 people as I tell the paralytic story of Mark 2:1–12. The construction and a demonstration of how to use this tool can be found on the internet.

Media

Creative approaches to oral communication are virtually endless in this age of apps, Bluetooth, micro SD cards, movie CDs, VDO clips, and easily accessible electronic devices. The “Jesus” movie, with over six billion showings world-wide, is a prime example of the potential of media’s global impact. For a fuller treatment of the broader redemptive meta-narrative, there are full-length eighty-minute videos like “The Hope” or “God’s Story” which has been produced in 300 languages in eighty countries. In Thailand I purchase “God’s Story” cheaply in lots of a thousand in order to give them out to interested Thai during festivals like Christmas. Such meta-narratives lay out a sound redemptive story line into which the individual stories of the Bible can be inserted.
Story Sets

One needs wisdom when selecting stories, since there are around one thousand Bible stories to choose from. A comprehensive set covering key Old and New Testament stories could number upwards of two hundred, while a more manageable set of core stories can be reduced to around thirty. Evangelizing and church planting in a culturally sensitive way means that story-set selection should take into account key world-view issues, bridges, and barriers.

I have found that shorter stories of ten to fifteen verses with limited dialogue and action elements are best for initial training of story-tellers. There is a place for crafting a story when summarizing longer sections or with Unengaged People Groups, a process championed by One Story training. However, there is much to be said for learning a Bible story with content accuracy, yet allowing it to be expressed with natural wording, rather than rote memorizing of the text, a practice which slows the learning of a story.

Story and Discipleship/Church Planting

Oral methods of communication play a vital role, not only in the initial planting of churches, but also in the ongoing nurture of church planting movements. We will see that it is possible to incorporate oral elements into most all aspects of evangelism and church life among oral peoples.

Preaching

R. C. Sproul is an unusually systematic and propositional pulpiteer, who sees the value of narrative preaching. “I’m big on preaching from the narratives because people will listen ten times as hard to a story as they will to an abstract lesson.” Like Sproul, the ex-pat and national workers I encounter see the benefits of stories, but mainly with youth, in small groups, or in evangelism rather than with adults on Sunday morning. Homiletically they see stories primarily as illustrations for the major points in their sermons, rather than acting as the core subject of their message.

Describing an “oral sermon” as a narrative sermon helps clarify the intent, but narrative sermons often maintain a heavy literate focus. To create an oral atmosphere, I typically rearrange the chairs into a semi-circle and then, stepping down from the pulpit, I give a short introduction to the story with a closed Bible and then, as I open the Bible, begin to tell the story accurately, yet in a natural way. As I close the Bible I ask the congregation to get into pairs and repeat as much as they remember to their neighbor (in more seasoned congregations you can have one person volunteer). Next, I lead them through the story once more in a participatory way, which brings me to about the fifteen-minute mark in my sermon. The remaining time is the core of the sermon as I unpack the story using open-ended observational questions, which the congregation responds to. Near the conclusion of the message, I move to application questions based on the biblical principles and lessons the congregation discovered as they made observations within the story. What you end up with is an engaging and often riveting inductive study of flesh and blood characters with the added benefit of placing a powerful narrative in the heart pocket for future retelling.

Many audiences are very used to a literate paradigm and need to be educated in such an oral approach. For this reason a preacher may want to read the story as well as tell it and instead of direct questions to the congregation, may simply use rhetorical questions, which he can answer himself (at least the congregation has a moment to reflect on the question and form their own answer, albeit silently).

Small Groups

One of the best disciple-making environments and a key to spiritual maturity are small groups that incorporate the best practices of worship, “one-anothering,” and inductive Bible study with a view to obedience and outreach. Avery Willis believed strongly in preaching and taught it in seminary, yet he made this statement about the power of small groups:

You don’t make disciples through preaching. Trying to make disciples through preaching is like spraying milk over a nursery full of screaming babies just hoping some of it falls into their mouths. That is about all you are doing when you are preaching. You make disciples as Jesus did—in face-to-face relationships in small groups.

Most people associate serious inductive Bible study with extensive note taking and a detailed focus on the printed text. There is usually one expert facilitator that everyone looks
Key components of such clusters is having each member identify both an obedience action step as well as identifying a person to tell the story to in the coming week.... This accountability aspect of obedience and sharing the story fills in a weak point that many have observed in traditional small groups.

see that momentum is carried on as parts of the story are discussed around the table.

Family Devotions/Personal Quiet Times

Deuteronomy 6 begins with the famous Shema (verse 4) and continues with an admonition for families to meditate on God’s Word as a life style (verses 7–9). In verses 20–24 a father is told what to do when his son asks the meaning of the 613 commands found in the Torah. To grasp even a portion of these commands is a daunting task for priests, much less children. The answer is not to explain the meaning of individual verses, but in effect to tell one's son the epic stories of the exodus, wilderness wanderings, and conquest of Canaan. As a child grows the details of God’s law will need further explanation, but a parent’s first priority is to make sure his or her child is well versed in the redemptive stories of the Bible.

Once a home schooling couple asked me if they could bring their two Junior High aged children to our five-day Simply the Story training. I readily agreed and was not surprised when these sharp MKs exceeded many adults in their grasp of the process. On the last day the father thanked me for the church planting applications he had gleaned during the week, but was most enthusiastic about the potential he had already seen for family devotions. Instead of dominating the devotional times and relying on printed materials, the parents could allow their two children to lead the devotions in an oral style using stories relevant to their family needs. A Bible professor confided in me that in the past he had difficulty discussing the Bible with his wife because of her perceived inadequacies against his vast theological knowledge. However, when they concentrated on inductive study of stories, they found it very natural to discuss God’s word together as they sat at home, in a restaurant, or even on trips in the car.

Counseling

Harriet Hill, working among traumatized Africans, found that one of the most effective ways to counsel these oral people was through sharing stories of abuse and trauma that they could readily identify with. The nature of our world means that wounds of the heart from war, ethnic tensions, natural disasters, and abuse will only increase. Bible stories address the full gamut of human needs and many are brutally honest accounts of the problems and traumas that mankind faces on a daily basis. The field of counseling is quite broad and complex and there is always a need for professionally trained counselors. However, most oral populations do not have the luxury of licensed counselors and must rely on pastoral counselors. A lay counselor with a database of biblical stories that address felt needs can discern the need being presented and share a story that addresses that need.

Short Term Mission Trips

Most fields accept a large number of short term mission trips each year. I try to make sure that each member of the groups I receive or prepare for such trips is ready to share at least one Bible story orally. I try to select a good cross section of stories that have a good potential for use on the trip. A team of nine visited me for two weeks and because each one was prepared to tell their story in English, I was able to size up the ministry situation and use a number of their stories. Those who never told their stories on the field were at least able to gain personal benefit, plus the ability to use their story at a future time.

Seminary and Christian Schools

All of my academic training through the PhD level occurred in the literature-saturated west, so it was no surprise that I taught as I had been taught. I never seriously considered narrative or oral communication techniques due to my propositional
bias. I unconsciously believed that “real truth” was best packaged in a propositional package and that somehow using Bible stories would miss the main point that I was trying to make.

Presently I am experimenting with teaching seminary classes in a much more oral manner by stressing stories and characters along with doctrine. This approach has been well received by a number of seminaries in both Asia and the States. In Thailand, my desire for this approach has been fueled by the realization that most of my graduate students are effectively biblically illiterate, having missed an exposure to many foundational stories that I learned as a child in Sunday School.

By modeling what I call “oral andragogy” in the classroom and designing oral exams, projects, and presentations for the students, I am seeing a positive absorption of class content, but also a noticeably higher engagement and enjoyment of God’s Word on the part of the students. Such an innovative approach, however, often ends up being a concern to other faculty leaders. To at least partially ease the fears of these “gatekeepers” of institutions, I wrote an article entitled “Objections and Benefits to an Oral Strategy for Bible Study and Teaching.” It is important to prove through qualitative research, demonstrable results, and transformational impact the validity of any perceived new training approach. That is why more practice and evaluation of oral approaches in academia is needed before any measurable influence will be seen in traditional theological education.

**Bible Memory**

Most every Christian has benefitted from memorizing a verse pack of key Scriptures. The advantages of such a discipline are readily seen, yet most would admit that they have forgotten many of the verses they memorized for want of a disciplined review system. I have found that the requirement of saying the verse word perfect and repeating the precise chapter and verse to be daunting for many. I first took up this formidable task in seminary when a fellow student challenged me to memorize two key verses from each book of the Bible, a total of 132 verses. I’ve benefited greatly from this exercise and have no need to review many of them, however, certain verses need constant review after even forty years.

You can imagine my amazement after a fairly short exposure to learning and absorbing Bible stories, to see the number of verses in my heart pocket far exceed the 132 individual verses in my verse pack. Up to that point I could not have told you even one content accurate Bible story. (I could have summarized a number, but unlike my verse pack, my value system for stories did not include content accuracy.)

Since only a few of the stories I’m working on exceed the ten to fifteen verse limit, I find that simple repetitions coupled with picturing the story with a drawn storyboard places a high percentage of the story into my long term memory. The added benefit over time and practice means that many stories need virtually no review, a luxury I never had with my verse pack. Just working on ten stories of ten verses each means that you have potential ownership of one hundred verses, a figure that any church planter or pastor would love to claim for his congregation.

**English Teaching**

The ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have agreed to use English as the medium for business. As in other Asian nations, church planters are finding that the teaching of English is becoming an increasingly effective bridge builder in relationships and sharing the gospel. Gary and Evelyn Harthcock found this to be the case in their ministry in Cambodia to Buddhist monks and ended up producing a number of resources for ESL teaching. Recently our team of story-tellers in Chiang Mai was asked to teach medical students conversational English in a story form. Following the Harthcock’s examples, simple, short Bible stories will be used as the basis for the lessons. The students will first learn the story in a group context and then dialogue about the characters and events as they respond to open-ended questions along with an emphasis on difficult vocabulary and wording.

**Oral Bible Schools**

The nature of Bible education on the field has always been geared to literate learners, which means primary oral learners have had great difficulty in getting the training they need. For instance, usually literacy is a minimum requirement for the role of elder. However, the requirement in 1 Timothy 3:2 states that one be “apt to teach,” a stipulation that can be met if the elder gains a good grasp of the Bible in oral form and knows how to communicate it orally. An encouraging trend in training such leaders has been the development of Oral Bible Schools (OBS), which have been started in places like India, Africa, and the Philippines.

One effective model is to have the students meet for a two week period as they learn fifteen to twenty stories which they practice and then take back to their villages for the next two weeks where they share the stories and work at their occupation. This process continues for six months and gives students a good grasp of over 200 Bible stories. The goal is to encourage
these students to continue learning and gain as much literacy as they can so that they can accurately handle the more propositional genres of the Word. However, the reality is that many will remain non-literate or functionally so.

**Conclusion**

Like most of my missionary peers, I am a “high end user” of the Bible and am used to processing God’s word with highly literate tools. At the same time, like my peers, I find myself working among “low end users” who, as preferred oral learners, process information much differently than myself. Missiologically we have done an admirable job in reaching the relatively small percentage of the world’s population that are strongly literate, but that leaves billions both in the majority world as well as the secondarily oral West who respond best to an oral approach.

Recognizing and accepting the major differences in literate and oral communication/learning styles is a necessary first step in addressing this issue. One should expect some discomfort as adjustments are made and cherished literate paradigms are challenged. Missiologically the oral movement is relatively new and is still developing as various trainers seek to find best practices in orality. More qualitative research and longitudinal studies of the impact of such training needs to be done. Also, the biblical and academic validity of an oral approach needs to be confirmed and barriers need to be surmounted if the “gatekeepers” (educators, denominational, and mission agency leaders) are to be affected.29

It seems fitting to end this article with the challenge that pastor Andy Stanley gives to those who seek to preach effectively to this present generation in a style that is quite different than his famous father, Charles Stanley. Andy’s appeal is specifically to preachers in western contexts, yet a similar challenge could be given to missionaries ministering to oral populations:

> Are you willing to abandon a style, an approach, a system that was designed in another era for a culture that no longer exists? Are you willing to step out of your comfort zone in order to step into the lives God has placed in your care? Are you willing to make the adjustment? Will you consider letting go of your alliterations and acrostics and three point outlines and talk to people in terms they understand? Will you communicate for life change?29

**NOTES**

1 John Davis, Poles Apart? Contextualizing the Gospel (Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan, 1993), 143.
2 Simply the Story is a story training organization based in Hemet, California with the distinctive of training storytellers to dig deeply and inductively into Bible stories in an oral style. STS offers workshops in six major regions of the world and has been used in over 100 countries with the “God’s Story” DVD being translated into 335 languages.
4 Harry Box, Don’t Throw the Book at Them (Pasadena: William Carey, 2014), 189.
6 Harry Box, “Communicating Christianity to Oral, Event-Oriented People” (Diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1992), 59.
9 J. M. Price, Jesus the Teacher (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1946), 99.
10 Avery Willis and Mark Snowden, Truth that Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 95.
11 Davis, Poles Apart?, 114.
13 Steve Cioccolanti, From Buddha to Jesus (Oxford: Monarch, 2007), 123–32.
15 Caloy Gabuco, Telling the Story: Chronological Bible Story Pictures (Paranaque City, Philippines: Church Strengthening Ministry, 2003).
22 Willis and Snowden, Truth that Sticks,” 87.
24 Andragogy, takes the Greek word andra meaning “man” and combines it with agogus meaning “leader of” to stress the teaching of adults. This is an important distinction, since many people think of telling stories as an approach most suited for children.
Orality, Preaching, and the Gospel

Desmond Soh

Orality, Preaching, and the Gospel

The Corrida de toros fiesta is a bloody affair. Spanish matadors fight 1000-pound bulls in a highly ritualized dance of death. In the end, the bull is slain in the grisly battle between the man and beast. Similarly, a matador may also be mortally wounded. No one really wins. A similar battle is waged today in the pulpit. There are preachers who focus on meaning of the biblical text, but sometimes at the expense of making the text meaningful to listeners. Their sermons are usually didactic and literate containing logical points. On the other side of the arena are “orality matadors” shouting for a departure from a logical and sequential approach consisting of propositional points because they are concerned about audience sovereignty and how to craft sermons to make an impact on the listeners. These preachers often advocate sermons forms that are more “narrative” or the structure mimics that of a story. Proponents often aim for a “multisensory” sermon that pulls out a myriad of props and other creative elements that stimulate sensory perception. Indeed, the narrative sermon form is gaining traction in the West and increasingly in the Global South. About 60% of the world’s population are oral learners. Success stories on how an oral rather than a literate approach towards sharing the gospel (and preaching) to these people have given birth to orality movements. In addition, missiologists have discovered that oral learners are not the only ones who prefer non-literate communication. Increasingly, Western societies are shifting to a more visual, digital, and interactive approach. In addition, some consider the traditional tools of evangelism (e.g. giving out tracts and Bibles) and propositional preaching as less effective in reaching cultures influenced by postmodernity.

However, the power of the narrative has not disappeared. We are still captivated by a good story well told. Will a different preaching form offer a viable option for missiologists and homileticians to reach secondary oral learners and those who are influenced by postmodernity? As a homiletics professor, I am concerned that we are producing graduates who will textually construct their learning without considering their audiences who may prefer and process, information differently. This difference is not just an issue of pedagogy or learning preferences. As a missionary, I am concerned about the problem of poor receptivity towards preaching, the proclamation of the gospel, and producing disciples who will do likewise. Differences between the literacy levels of the two entities can result in barriers to effective communication of the gospel. How can we remain faithful to the preaching of the Word and yet fail to proclaim to the world? Can it be that the people who are listening to sermons are somehow fundamentally different today and the entire homiletics discipline needs to accommodate this majority? Or as Dave McClellan says, “What would it look like if orality was allowed to permeate the homiletic air?”

To answer these questions, this article will make short excursions into orality studies and sermon forms to offer possible ways forward. I propose we need to add to our repertoire of preaching forms, especially in narrative preaching. In my conclusion I will make some suggestions on how to inject more “orality” into our sermons.

Orality and Preaching

The standard work contrasting oral- and print-oriented communicators is by the Jesuit priest Walter J. Ong. Ong summarizes the invasion of print (typography) and later the invention of electronic communication that displaced an oral culture. The implications of this transition from an oral to a typographic and later to an electronic world are tremendous. In an oral world, the primary medium of communication is sound coming from the speaker’s voice and communication occurs face-to-face. The advent of print heralds a typographic world that resulted in individualism and a shift of authority, where meaning resides in “experts” who interpret and hold the texts, not “elders” who help listeners construct meaning together in an oral world.

Unfortunately, some preachers assume that anybody could understand literate outlines of the passages they used to present the gospel because they operate...
from a literate, typographic epistemology. Social, linguistic, and anthropological research reveal that this is a misconception. Ong notes that primary and secondary oral communicators may not understand the text when it is presented to them by means of expository outlines, principles, precepts, steps, and logically developed discourses. Mark M. Overstreet similarly warns, Evangelical institutions train ministers who prepare to communicate using literate methods including linear, logical, or other analytical methodologies. In a world deeply influenced by non-literate communications, it is estimated that 90% of Christian workers using these logocentric methods to communicate fail to cross the ditch connecting to the audience, whether on the frontier mission field or in the local church pulpit. With over 4 billion learners challenged with the burden of hearing and understanding these methods of comprehending the preached word of God, it is time for consideration to be given to introducing primary and secondary orality and its effects on the field and in the classroom.

This mismatched communication between literate preachers and oral learners results in a collision between what is being heard and what oral learners understand as the gospel. Even if they do understand, they may be unable to recall and reproduce what they heard. Oral communicators use different means of constructing, internalizing, recalling, and reproducing information and beliefs than do literate.

Unfortunately, some preachers have tended to gravitate toward the “what” to preach rather than the “how” to preach. When the study and preaching of Scripture becomes dominated by literacy, there may be unfortunate consequences, especially when those forces meet cultures still conditioned to think first orally. Therefore, preachers have to seriously consider their listeners when crafting sermons to account for the different ways of hearing, learning, and understanding the gospel message. This is where sermon forms are important in our discussion and this is where we turn next.

### Between Two Forms—Narrative and Propositional Sermons

John Stott points out that the preacher’s task is to bridge the gulf between the biblical world and the contemporary world. Bridging the gulf requires faithfulness to the text of the Bible and sensitivity to the culture of the hearers. Failure to understand the listeners’ communication preference is not just an oversight but suggests a deep disconnect between the parish and the preacher who claims to care for them.

But preaching is not just an exercise of ecclesiastical rhetoric. We are also the people of the “Book.” Propositional, objective truths cannot be replaced with narrative perspectivism alone. Whether through choices of language or sermon forms, preachers can either alienate or attract their listeners. One of the goals preachers have is to attract and maintain people’s attention while remaining faithful to the preaching of God’s Word. Yet preachers often preach in a way that assumes one standard form fits all. To effectively reach listeners with culturally relevant sermons, one key area we need to look at is sermon forms. For the sake of our discussion, I will posit two general categories of sermon forms: narrative and propositional sermons.

A narrative sermon does not simply use stories (real or imagined) to illustrate and apply the biblical text nor is it just preaching a certain genre of the Bible. Neither is a narrative sermon devoid of theology. Narrative sermons come in two types:

1. Sermons that contain stories: It is important to note that while the narrative sermons include stories, narrative preaching does not purely employ stories. These stories can be real or imagined. Neither is it merely a contextualized story in modern setting. And these stories may contain biblical narratives.

2. Sermons that are shaped like a story: What distinguishes this narrative sermon from sermons that contain stories is its structure, with discernible plot, characterization, setting, and points of view. This type of sermon does not contain stories but is a story in its structure. The sermon is designed to move the listeners in the same way as stories, or plots, rather than points. This means that a narrative sermon, rather than being made up of stories, is a story plot from the start to the end.

A propositional sermon is usually didactic and tends towards deduction in its form, where the preacher proceeds from general to particular thought. It follows a logical and sequential approach consisting of points. The sermon’s goal is directed toward teaching the meaning of the biblical text from which the main points are abstracted. The sermon dissects the text and places premium on rational argument of a central thesis. The sermon unfolds like a discourse, not a story, and tends to be directive.

With these two sermon form choices, preachers have an unenviable task as they prepare to preach. They have to wrestle with being faithful to the text while winning the ear of their listeners. We will now deliberate on the theological and rhetorical reasons for employing narrative preaching. Reflecting the Apostle Paul’s concern about his preaching the gospel, are narrative sermons “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–4)?

### Is Preaching Narrative Sermons Biblical?

The Bible is both literary and rhetorical. It is literary because it contains various genres ranging from historical narrative in the Pentateuch and Gospels to the didactic Pauline Epistles to apocalyptic literature found in many Prophetic books and Revelation. It is rhetorical because the Word of God persuades and influences listeners. For the preacher, appreciating these two dimensions of the literary and rhetorical functions of the Bible is crucial in sermon preparation. Yet sermon design and form is not just about making an impression or creating an experience. It involves theology. An investigation of the styles of preaching portrayed in Scripture allows us to see that we can remain faithful to the text while assuming a variety of presentational styles. Moreover, the option of a variety of apparently legitimate styles should make us wonder whether there is not a continuum between textuality and
orality rather than an either/or. Three important biblical premises undergird why preaching narrative sermons is biblical.  

Firstly, narrative sermons mirror closely the narrative portions of the Bible, and narrative sermons effectively contextualize the Bible for a narrative-rich culture influenced by orality. Narrative is the dominant literary genre in the Bible. Sidney Greidanus describes the narrative portions of the Bible as the “central, foundational, and all-encompassing genre of the Bible.” Ultimately, this story is narrated and personified in Jesus Christ when “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Christ’s incarnation as a sinless man is an unparalleled story. The form used to convey an unchanging truth. Good preachers not only exegete the Bible, but also serve audiences through sermons styles that mirror closely the form of the text of their exegetical discoveries.

Secondly, biblical characters preach with variety, using both narrative and other sermon forms. Narrative preaching was the popular sermonic form used by biblical authors, with Jesus Christ, who is not just the “story” but also the Master storyteller. It is important to see how he placed a premium on stories, especially parables, and how the stories in turn fulfill his teaching and preaching purposes. N. T. Wright argues that Jesus intended the parables to challenge the existing Jewish worldview and to provide an alternative picture of reality that Jesus called “the kingdom of God.” He says, “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan. Brian Wicker says, “Stories are, actually, peculiarly good at modifying or subverting other stories and their worldviews. Where head-on attack would certainly fail, the parable hides the wisdom of the serpent behind the innocence of the dove, gaining entrance and favour which can then be used to change assumptions which the hearer would otherwise keep hidden away for safety.”

Jesus was not the only one who employed narrative preaching. Other biblical characters, especially the prophets, used a variety of “preaching forms” to warn the people of God of their impending judgment from God. Hosea married a prostitute. Ezekiel cooked food over excrement (Ezek 4:9–12). Isaiah walked around naked for three years (Isa 20:2–3). Jeremiah smashed a pot (Jer 19:10–11). And Nathan told a story to David (2 Sam 12).

Third, we find biblical support for narrative preaching in the Apostle Paul. While one might argue that his letters in the New Testament are mainly didactic and propositional, it is important to note that Paul taught in terms of an overarching story (cf. Eph 1:9–10). Although Paul’s writings, especially in his Epistles, are Hellenistic, with Aristotelian logic and quite distinctly different from a narrative (e.g. Romans and Galatians), this is not necessarily contradictory. For one, Paul was sensitive to culture, for in 1 Corinthians 9, he made a culturally sensitive statement that fits into his approach towards winning both Jews and Gentiles for Christ. He was willing to be “all things to all men, that (he) may by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22b). And secondly, even though Pauline speeches seem to suggest a very literate style of homily, as evidenced in his speeches in the Book of Acts, Heald and Arthurs argue that “Biblical speeches are always set within a narrative context, so the exegete must examine carefully the situations that called them forth.” In addition, N. T. Wright proposes that Paul’s teachings are nothing more than extensions of the Old Testament stories that he had in mind as he wrote his letters to the churches and to the leaders of the early churches.

Interestingly, Richard Hays’s reference to “intertextual echo” in Pauline letters is akin to Wright’s proposal. Hays analyzed Paul’s subtle use of Scripture, claiming that “the most significant elements of intertextual correspondence between old context and new can be implicit rather than voiced, perceptible only within the silent space framed by the juncture of two texts.” Similarly, Sylvia Keesmaat demonstrates that Paul uses the story of the exodus tradition in his exegesis in Galatians and Romans 8 and the exodus story in Paul’s writings is “not limited to his verbatim quotations, but is activated by all sorts of allusions and echoes.”

To summarize, the predominant genre of the Bible is narrative and biblical examples show how individuals such as Paul and the prophets in the Old Testament employed these narrative sermonic forms to embody their message of redemption. Jesus is the ultimate example of this contextualized methodology of carefully selecting and crafting of stories in the form of parables that are biblically faithful and culturally relevant to his listeners.

Rhetorical Impact of Narrative Preaching

One obvious benefit of narrative preaching is that it is the closest to the biblical narrative form. The form of the text should affect the form of the sermon. A derivative benefit from being form-sensitive is the experiencing of the rhetorical impact of narratives. Brian Wicker says, “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative.”

Our lives are full of stories; they are
The preacher takes the listener on a gripping journey through the story filled with conflict, suspense, and eventual resolution, making the experience memorable. In contrast, the propositional sermon usually targets the cognition, and often misses out the full spectrum of emotion and excitement a story offers.

of the essence of being alive. The listener of a narrative sermon is able to find a sense of identity through the narrative process. Stories naturally communicate more holistically involving emotions, intuitions, and imaginations as well as cognition. This helps engage the listeners’ mind, will, and emotions. The preacher takes the listener on a gripping journey through the story filled with conflict, suspense, and eventual resolution, making the experience memorable. In contrast, the propositional sermon usually targets the cognition, and often misses out the full spectrum of emotion and excitement a story offers.

Moreover, narrative sermons match and maintain our identity through vicarious identification with biblical characters, from the tragedy of Samson’s folly to the triumph of Stephen’s martyrdom. Michael Williams spotlights this identity-forming characteristic when he describes the narrative form of stories as “sacred encounters that tell us who we are, whose we are, and where we belong.”

Furthermore, narrative preaching is also less predictable and direct, qualities that benefit the preacher when the target audience is defensive. The withholding of propositional statements serves a postmodern audience well because they are inclined to be suspicious of anyone who claims to hold objective truth. Narrative preaching is primarily inductive and is built around the delay of the preacher’s meaning. This form of preaching is appealing, because it is both non-threatening and inviting. The ultimate rhetorical impact of narrative preaching lies in its proximity to the listeners. In cultures dominated by relativism, experiencing stories becomes the standard from which to distinguish and evaluate “truth.” Narrative preaching lends itself easily to this shifting culture since stories have universal appeal.

Injecting “Orality” into Sermons: Some Practical Considerations

Here are several suggestions in the light of what we have covered so far:

1. Consider employing narrative preaching as one of the tools to communicate God’s truths. Narrative sermons are appropriate on special occasions such as Christmas, Youth Sundays, and Easter.

2. Pathos, or emotional appeal, is just as important as logos, or logic and reason. Considering adding culturally appropriate gestures and pauses, and avoid wordiness. Involve your audience when preaching by using first and second person pronouns such as “I,” “you,” and “we.”

3. Have one central, main idea in your sermon. All other points, if any, serve the main idea. This idea should be clear, concise, compelling, and creative.

4. Make use of restatement and repetition in your oral communication. Use the principle of redundancy and focus because your audiences cannot review what you preach, unlike reading a manuscript.

5. Preach with variety. Use multi-sensory approaches with props, music, drama, PowerPoints, and more if these approaches support and not distract your audiences from your sermon.

Concluding Thoughts on Narrative Preaching

The Bible has an immense trove of narrative and we need to turn to it afresh and consider using this form in capturing the attention of our audiences. Biblical narratives are not just historical stories, but are literally artistic and far too sophisticated to be handled homiletically in simple three-point propositions. Therefore, narrative preaching, while not indispensable, is useful when employed discerningly to an audience influenced by postmodernity and those who are part of an oral culture.

Let me conclude with a word from personal experience. When I was performing my doctoral research, I conducted a comparative study on the effectiveness of both sermon forms. After spending almost a decade preaching to them as a missionary, I wanted to know which sermon form best reached Indonesian Chinese teenagers. A total of 1000 different students participated in my study. Five sermons in different forms (narrative and propositional) of the same passages were preached and their ability to recall the “Big Idea” was taken twenty-four hours and three days later. Interestingly, I found that both sermon forms are almost equally effective in helping students recall the central thesis of the sermon. I have a confession to make. When I started my study, I was quite confident that narrative sermons would win hands down against propositional sermons. In the end, based on unbiased data, I had to admit that it is not a “one or the other” conclusion, but a “both/and!” This forced me to conclude my thesis as follows.

In Asia, rice serves as both a daily staple food and a gastronomical art form. From Japanese sushi, to Indonesian nasi goring, to Singaporean rice dumplings, to Cantonese porridge, rice fills hungry stomachs and fulfills culinary cravings. My concluding verdict, without denying the many merits of narrative preaching, protests against narrativist imperialism. Like good rice, narrative sermons are wonderful but not everything. But when served with prudent skills and passion, narrative preaching can be a useful, if not necessary tool for the preacher.
Like good rice, narrative sermons are wonderful but not everything. But when served with prudent skills and passion, narrative preaching can be a useful, if not necessary tool for the preacher.

1. According to Charles Madinger, orality is “a complex of how oral cultures best receive, process, remember and replicate (pass on) news, important information, and truths.” Madinger, “A Literate’s Guide to the Oral Galaxy,” Orality Journal 2.2 (2013): 16. Orality is a learned framework for interpreting the world around us. Texuality, on the other hand, is an orientation and a preference towards printed words. Orality and texuality should not be considered antitheses but function as a continuum. Perhaps we should instead consider both sermon forms as part of a continuum between textuality and orality and that both are profitable tools in the preacher’s toolbox.

2. One example of this movement is the International Orality Network. See their website for a history of how the movement developed, http://www.orality.net/how_we_began (accessed 28 Nov 2015).


4. James B. Slack has described five levels of literacy to be considered in presenting the gospel in “The Way People Learn: Exploring the Implications of Orality, Literacy and Chronological Bible Storying Concerning Global Evangelization,” http://mediain.imresources.org/files/83/8361/8361-46134.pdf (accessed 24 Nov 2015). Slack notes that many people in developed countries are secondary oral learners even though they can read and write. Secondary oral learners choose to form their beliefs and organize their worldview through oral learning and are more influenced by music, movies, television, and other sensory experiences than by texts.


6. James B. Slack has described five levels of literacy to be considered in presenting the gospel in “The Way People Learn: Exploring the Implications of Orality, Literacy and Chronological Bible Storying Concerning Global Evangelization,” http://mediain.imresources.org/files/83/8361/8361-46134.pdf (accessed 24 Nov 2015). Slack notes that many people in developed countries are secondary oral learners even though they can read and write. Secondary oral learners choose to form their beliefs and organize their worldview through oral learning and are more influenced by music, movies, television, and other sensory experiences than by texts. These sermons are variously called an inductive movement, a story, an act of overhearing and imagination, and a conversation. The latter is often used by emergent churches to attract postmoderns.

7. An example of this movement is the International Orality Network. See their website for a history of how the movement developed, http://www.orality.net/how_we_began (accessed 28 Nov 2015).


9. James B. Slack, “The Realities of Orality and Literacy in This Century,” Adjunct Reading 1 in Oral Bible Forum (Albuquerque, New Mexico: 10–12 July 2003): 1. This move is consistent with cultures influenced by postmodernism.


14. Sylvia C. Keesmaat, Paul and his Story: (Re)Interpreting the Exodus Tradition, JSNTSup 181 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 228. Keesmaat says that Paul relies on the familiarity of the exodus story to frame his particular arguments. Paul does not only invite his readers to remember a particular text but to remember a particular story.


17. Similarly, Timothy Keller says “the duties of preachers included not only probare, to instruct and prove, but also delectare, to rivet and delight, and incitare, to stir and move people to action,” in Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism (New York: Viking, 2015), 13.

A brother and sister I know went to a church, but after about four months they left. “We couldn’t understand what they were talking about and they kept putting pressure on us to believe in Jesus.” I was disturbed because their other sister was a good friend and she longed for her siblings to trust Jesus. I asked if I could come and share stories with them. They were suspicious about having anything to do with another Christian, but finally agreed to one meeting. To their surprise, they loved the stories and several months later both came to new life.

Churches in Taiwan long for their members to be able to share Jesus effectively with everyone they know. Sharing Jesus can be done in many ways: through testimonies, invitations to church events, serving people and Bible studies. The question we need to ask is whether our friends understand what we’re trying to communicate. Christians often use special vocabulary and talk in abstract ways that non-Christians don’t understand. Sometimes we jump straight to Jesus and proclaim he is the “answer” to everything, even though our friends don’t even know what the questions are!

How can we share in a way that shows the Bible’s relevance and also can be understood by everyone—old and young, male and female, educated and uneducated? How can we share so that people’s whole way of viewing the world is transformed, so that deep and not simply superficial changes can be made? We are often impatient, but something as deeply held as worldview takes time to change. Storytelling specialises in changing worldview, for if we change the stories we believe in, then we change. This kind of deep change is what “making disciples” is about. Storytelling isn’t just for evangelism. From the first story it is doing the work of discipleship.

I was a reluctant convert to storytelling. I immediately put it in the category of “children’s ministry.” Since I did little children’s ministry, I dismissed it as simplistic and “not suitable for adults.” I was also busy enough leading evangelistic Bible studies. Even if I had been interested in this tool I could see that changing my communication style would require a significant investment of time.

Although I first dismissed it, I learned I was wrong. Thankfully God pressed me to “give it a try.” My first attempt was in a busy photo-developing shop. While I didn’t do a particularly good job with the story and a constant flow of customers meant numerous interruptions, I was astounded by the response of the hearer. She loved the story and wanted to hear more. Suddenly I was no longer having to start gospel conversations from scratch. Instead people were asking me to tell them about the Bible.

When I met the woman in the photo-developing shop, it was easy to ask if she would listen to a story. The subsequent visits were also easier because she naturally asked me for the next one in the series. And if someone doesn’t ask, we can simply say, “May I tell you the next story in the set?” This is far easier than spending ages praying for a natural opening to start a gospel conversation. Going from ordinary topics to the gospel is hard work and takes much practice.

Since the first experience in 2004 was so positive, I continued experimenting. I quickly worked out that the model of story I received was too long and complex. In fact, it was multiple-stories-in-one with teaching and explanation in the body of the story. So over the next couple of years I decreased the lengths of my stories.

It wasn’t until five years into my learning process that I met John Walsh, an American storyteller. I discovered much from him about learning stories, leading discussion,
and using poetry, song, and drama to help the story dig its way deeper into our hearts. He demonstrated to me how to tell biblically accurate stories using only his voice and hands as his tools. No sophisticated technology or visual aids.

While my stories improved over time, they were still summaries and contained some teaching “asides” along the way. So I kept shortening the stories and coming ever closer to the biblical text. This was easy with a “miracle” story like Mark 2:1–12, but what does one do with lengthy stories like the one about Noah? For a long time I summarised that story by selecting the parts I thought were important and leaving other parts out. The problem was that I had three years of theological education which equipped me to recognise the main points while many locals hadn’t learned this skill. It simply isn’t part of their education system. Another problem with a summarised story was that those I taught were trying to replicate my story (which was influenced by many things, including my personality). Since they weren’t “me” and didn’t think like me, they struggled to learn the stories.

In 2014, I had a chance to attend “Simply the Story” training. The main training took three days, with an extra two days added for those wanting to learn how to train others. One of the significant strengths of this method is the way it teaches people how to learn stories and its limiting stories to sixteen consecutive verses or less. This means that when my team and I wanted to tell the Noah story, we had to look at the whole story and decide, “If we can only do up to sixteen verses which sixteen verses should we do?” In the end we chose Genesis 6:9–22. But since this story concludes with Noah and his family going into the ark, what do we do about the rest of the story? I generally no longer tell it. Instead, in Taiwan OMF and SEND have worked together to produce a series of “mini-Bibles” that contain about four chapters of the Bible. I say to (literate) people after telling a story, “This little booklet contains the story you just heard and tells you what happened afterwards.” That way, I’m encouraging people to read God’s word. If the people you work with prefer not to read, then a similar thing could be accomplished through recording the Bible or Bible portions to match the stories using a variety of digital technologies.

I love this way of storytelling because the standard is now God’s word. People know when they’ve really learned the story or whether there are gaps or bits they need to work on.

How to learn a story
The easiest way to learn a story is to read (or listen to) the story out loud. Reading out loud slows you down and brings out the details. Once you have read the story, close your Bible and immediately retell (out loud) as much of the story as you remember. Don’t worry if the first time you tell the story you leave big gaps. The next time you read the story you’ll pay particular attention to the parts you forgot. Repeat this process three or four times and then start practicing with everyone you meet.

Introducing the story
Most stories need a short introduction. The story should be placed in its context and any specialised words, like “Sabbath,” explained. For example, the introduction to Genesis 16 could be, “Many generations passed after Noah. One day, God spoke to one of Noah’s descendants, a man called Abraham who lived in Babylon (Iraq). ‘Leave your people and your father’s household and travel to the place I will tell you. I will make you into a great nation and bless you. Through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.’ Although Abraham was seventy-five years old he followed God to the land of Canaan (now Israel). When he was eighty five and his wife, Sarah, was seventy five, this story happened.” Then tell the Genesis 16:1–10 story.

Another important thing to do when presenting the story is to clearly differentiate between the introduction and the actual story. You can do this by opening or closing the Bible or simply saying, “Today’s story starts here … and ends here.”

For the last twelve years, I’ve been telling stories to adults all over the world. I’ve told them to Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and atheists. I’ve told them to young and old. I’ve told them in Western and non-Western contexts, to the illiterate and to PhDs. There has been almost no difference in how they’re received. Repeatedly, I’ve discovered that “people love stories.” This should not come as a surprise. Movies make billions out of the story business. Secular research also emphasises the point: “Say it with stories and people will listen.”

Once, on a short holiday, I met four older women who were staying at my hostel. They were curious when they heard I was a storyteller. “What kind of stories do you tell?” they asked. Thinking it was a one-off opportunity, I told them Genesis 1–3.

“How many stories do you know?”

“I usually tell a series of fourteen.”

When they heard I was at the hostel for three nights they said, “Can we hear all the stories?”

So each evening, after hiking all day, I would tell five stories to them in Taiwanese. They loved our story times and as I was leaving on the final morning to catch my bus they said to a new couple who walked in, “You ought to ask this lady to tell you one of her stories.”

So the young couple also heard Genesis 1–3. They asked so many questions that I nearly missed my bus because I had to tell them six Old Testament story sections. Even though my time
was limited, I was able to leave them with the web links so that they could discover the fourteen stories on their own.5

**Storytelling makes it easy to start a conversation**

Though starting a conversation can be intimidating, offering to tell a story may well break the ice. Often we only need to say, “I’ve just learned a story and need to practice it with someone. Would you have five minutes to listen?” Few people refuse. Another approach is to introduce yourself: “I’m a teacher” or “I’m a market salesperson” and then add, “but what I really love to do is tell stories.”

Once you’ve learned a few stories, pray that God reveals natural opportunities to say, “That reminds me of a story,” or “I know a story that deals with that issue.” Mr. and Mrs. Lim, handbag sellers, had just experienced a natural disaster that buried their hometown in three metres of mud. They shared their grief and pain, which enabled me to gently ask, “Why do such terrible things happen?” Their viewpoint was formed by their religious upbringing. They wondered what terrible sin their townspeople had committed to result in this disaster. After listening to them I said, “I know a story that helps explain why this world is such a painful place.” I told them the Genesis 1–3 stories, starting with creation, to show the contrast between the perfect world God made and the current one marred by sin. I was able to explain that it is because we live in this broken world that terrible things happen; they are not always the result of our sinful choices.

This initial conversation opened the door for them to hear many stories. They are still afraid to follow Jesus as they fear their parents’ rejection and anger. However, their worldview has been strongly impacted. In 2012 there was a prophecy that the world would end on 21 December. As I passed their stall, Mr. Lim called out, “Are you frightened that the world is ending this Friday?”

“Jesus tells us that no one knows when the world will end, so I know it won’t be this Friday. But he could return anytime. Are you ready if he returns today?”

Mr. Lim asked, “What is our ark?”

“What do you mean?” I replied.

“Well, when the world ended last time, God prepared an ark for Noah to escape the flood.”

When I asked, “What do you think is our ark now?” Mrs. Lim answered, “We have to trust in Jesus and then we’ll always be safe.”

Bible storytelling helps people begin to understand and apply the Bible into their own lives.

**Listeners often express deep truths simply**

A thirty-year-old man owned a bicycle shop. After I’d been building a friendship with his family for a year, an unexpected thunderstorm forced me to seek shelter from the rain in front of the bike shop. The owner asked me how long I was going to live in Taiwan. “I plan to live here thirty to forty years, but at any time God might ask me to go elsewhere.”

“You mean you just trust God and follow wherever he leads you?”

“Your comment reminds me of a story about a man who followed God even though he didn’t know where God was leading him.”

I told him the Abraham story. At the end he burst out, “You are a descendent of Abraham because you are carrying the blessing he was given to us in this town, at the ends of the earth.”

When I heard this man say this I believed that he would become a follower of Jesus. After hearing Bible stories every week for a year he was baptised and now tells stories to others.

**My learning journey continues**

I have loved the challenge of Bible storytelling, but at times I’ve wished I didn’t have so much to learn. People that I train now have the benefits of my twelve years of mistakes and the refining that has improved the process. For instance, while I have greatly benefited from “Simply the Story,” I do not follow its every detail. This is particularly noticeable by the discussion method we use. “Simply the Story” is storyteller led and requires a great deal of training. Since we aim to train anyone to lead, we wanted a simpler method and have formulated one that usually only takes two to three times for someone to grasp and be able to use.

**Discussing the story and training others**

The following set of questions works best in a small group but can be used with individuals.6

**Facilitator:**

The role of the facilitator is to ensure that things move forward. While you don’t actually lead the group, you should work out a simple way to have different group members read and lead a question.

**Group instructions:**

The facilitator should inform the group: “We are going to answer six questions. The rule is that everyone

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5 Russell Gray used flip charts in the 1970s to illustrate Bible lessons.

6 We are going to answer six questions.
There are many reasons why “not answering” is a benefit. Not answering allows the important questions to be puzzled over for days and weeks. It stimulates people’s curiosity to read the Bible for themselves. We also helped solve a leadership issue because many people were afraid to be leaders because they felt they had to know a lot.

Six questions

1. What do you like about this story? Why?
   Since this question has no wrong answer, it allows people to relax.

2. What questions might someone have about this story? The idea is that everyone can raise multiple questions and the story teller doesn’t need to answer any of them! While this may sound counter-intuitive, try it first for several months and compare it with your previous situation when questions were answered.

   There are many reasons why “not answering” is a benefit. Personally, I love answering questions and so this discipline was difficult for me. However, after three months of not answering I discovered that when we answer questions, we often close off the learning process. Not answering allows the important questions to be puzzled over for days and weeks. It stimulates people’s curiosity to read the Bible for themselves. We also found that this method avoided the “answerer of questions” becoming the authority in the group. Rather, people went to the Bible for answers or just kept thinking. We also helped solve a leadership issue because many people were afraid to be leaders because they felt they had to know a lot. With this method, however, they only need to be able to facilitate rather than answer every question. When people feel they need to answer a question the answers were often shallow and sometimes completely incorrect.

   This question also helps people to know that it is okay to ask any question. I have had numerous Christians admit to me that they have many questions about the Bible but have never dared to ask them. This format gives them a way to express those questions without feeling that others are judging them.

   Possible questions include the following. “I wonder how they built the ark?” “Were people vegetarians before Noah?” “What does it mean to walk with God?”

3. What can we learn about people from the characters in this story?
   If a story includes many characters, you can group them and ask something like, “What do we learn about people from the priests? the crowd? the disciples?”

4. What can we learn about God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit from this story? Only ask about the member of the Trinity who is mentioned in the story.

5. After reading this story, what do you want to change in your life this week? State your answer in the form “This week I want to...”
   We have found that this question helps people to be concrete and to learn that truth is meant to be applied and not just talked about.

6. Who else needs to hear this story? We want people to get used to the idea that stories are meant to be passed on and not simply learned. With these last two questions we are saying “it is normal to obey God and to pass on his word to others.”

In our town there is a group of social workers who are employed by a Christian organisation. Even though most of the employees aren’t Christians, their company requires that they attend an hour of Bible study each week. Last year, two of us were invited to tell stories during this time. When we started, we only asked the first four of the questions since many of those in attendance weren’t Christians. However, we soon felt prompted to ask all six. From the third story, we were encouraged that three non-Christians shared the story with other colleagues who had missed it. Sadly, the believers in the group were more reluctant to repeat the stories. One week, after hearing an Abraham story, the oldest woman in the group said, “God always fulfils his promises. However his timing is sometimes much slower than ours and so we are tempted to try and help him in our own ways. This ends in disaster. What we need to do is wait for his timing.”

Choosing a set of stories

Another significant stage in my storytelling journey began in May 2015 when I was challenged to decrease my story set. Since we want locals to feel, “I can do this,” a set of fourteen stories was thought to be too daunting and may well have been one of the reasons we struggled to train local storytellers. We made the decision that eight stories would be about the right number.

The same person who challenged us to cut our story set to eight also suggested we add one story at the front to be our “seeker tool”. This story is designed to grab people’s attention to the point that they would be willing to listen to the whole set.

We wanted at least half of the stories to be from the Old Testament—since a majority of the Bible is Old Testament and that background is so essential to understand who Jesus is and what
he came to do. So the question we asked ourselves was, “If we could only use eight stories—four from the Old Testament and four from the New—which would they be?” We designed this initial set to allow people to understand what salvation is and why they need it. Clearly, a crucifixion story and resurrection story are essential. That meant we needed to add six others. But which ones should we pick? We started our decision making in reverse as we thought the New Testament stories might be easier to choose.

**New Testament**

Our team chose the following set of stories for the reasons stated below. As you consider your needs and context, you may find that you need to select a different set.

**Crucifixion (Luke 23:32–47)**

It is not easy to choose a “16-verse-or-less” account of the crucifixion! To put it into context, we summarise the arrest, denials, etc. in our introduction.


By limiting our story about the resurrection to the final third of the chapter, we can introduce the ascension and the Great Commission. The early part of the chapter can be easily summarised as the introduction.

Once these two stories were chosen, we had six other New Testament stories to choose from the original set of fourteen. Those six included the Christmas story and five miracle stories that demonstrate Jesus’ authority and who he was. Each team member had to justify their two choices and we also asked a local pastor who was from a non-Christian background for his input. We eventually chose the following.

**Jesus had authority to forgive sin and heal diseases (Mark 2:1–12)**

This story was chosen because it demonstrates two of Jesus’ powers and ties in well with the crucifixion.

**Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:32–44)**

This story shows Jesus’ authority over death, a power which prompts the question, “Who is this man?” It also introduces the plot to kill Jesus, a fact that can be mentioned at the end of the story as it leads into the story of the crucifixion. An alternative story would be one of the “authority over demons” stories.

While we cannot cover everything, the mini-Bibles are designed to cover the sections we don’t.

**Old Testament**

As difficult as it is to reduce the New Testament to four stories, we found it much more difficult to choose four stories from the Old Testament. In the end we chose the following:

**Rebellion (Genesis 3:1–15)**

To introduce the story of the fall of humankind, we summarise the creation account.10

**Abraham and Hagar (Genesis 16:2–10)**

The story about Abraham and Hagar requires an introduction summarising Genesis 12:1–7, as the blessing given to one man and through him to the entire nation of Israel is one of the central passages of the Bible. It also sets up the whole idea of how we are blessed through him.

While some may not find it easy to see why we chose this story, we have found that almost everyone relates to it since it is proceeds “like a soap opera.” Many people really start paying attention after hearing this story. This story relates well to our overall theme of “blessing”, as Abraham and Sarah tried to gain blessings in their own way rather than trusting God.

We did not choose the “sacrifice of Isaac” story (Gen 22:1–19) for two reasons. Firstly, this story on its own requires a long introduction. Secondly, when it is told out of context Abraham comes across as a super hero of trusting God when his real life story included at least three major failures. We have also discovered that many people were so shocked by this story—what kind of a God is so horrible as to ask Abraham to sacrifice his son?—that they stop listening altogether. While there might be a sort of natural “separating those truly interested,” we’d prefer that they would be able to listen to a whole set of stories before that division is made.

**Passover (Exodus 12:29–33)**

The Passover story is always remembered clearly because of the Chinese tradition of applying blessings painted on red paper over the door frame at Chinese New Year. The Bible also considers this an Old Testament “salvation” story, as the New Testament frequently links Jesus’ death with the Passover Lamb. We initially tried to learn the story from 12:21–33 but found that the instructions contained in verses 21–28 were difficult for people to memorise. Eventually we shortened the story to 12:29–33 and summarised the instructions from the earlier verses as part of an introduction.

**Initial “seeker tool” story**

After much prayer and discussion we decided we wanted a story of a “transformed life” that was tied to a local issue or felt need and would connect with every story in the set. Eventually we decided on the Zacchaeus story which links in with the local concern for “blessing”. We also felt that it should be a story that could easily introduced for people in our setting.

**Sample conversation to lead into the Zacchaeus story**

“Why do people in Taiwan go to temples?”

“They are looking for peace, wealth, and health.”

“So are you saying that they are seeking blessings?”

“Yes, we all want blessing.”

“I would like to tell you a story about a man who was outwardly blessed. He was healthy—he could climb trees as a grown man—and wealthy—though he got his wealth by cheating others.
But in spite of his health and wealth, do you think he was happy? Listen to the story and hear what people thought about him."

After this we tell the story from Luke 19 and then ask some questions starting with a comment like, “Let’s compare the ‘before’ and ‘after’ situation for Zacchaeus. We know that ‘before’ Zacchaeus appeared blessed with much wealth, a high paying job, and probably a big house and all that went with that lifestyle, but what clues does the story give about his heart situation?”

Many different answers are given here but some possible answers are, “He had no friends,” or “He wasn’t respected,” or “He was probably lonely and empty.”

Then we look at the “after” story and say something like, “By the end of the story he has given away between half and ninety percent of his wealth depending on how many people he had cheated. But what seems to be the situation with his ‘heart’ now? By the end of the story, the external blessings that Zacchaeus had were gone but the condition of his heart had greatly changed. What is his heart like now?”

While a variety of answers can be given, we use these to lead into the question, “What brought about the change?” I’ve only heard three answers to this. “He met Jesus,” or “He was saved,” or “He was found.”

If appropriate, we can bridge to our own “lostness” or “seeking blessing in wrong places” story/testimony. I try to tell this in two minutes or less in a “before and after format.”

This story could be concluded with, “Would you like to hear more stories about how your life can be transformed like Zacchaeus and how you can find true blessing?”

While we picked the story about Zacchaeus, you will have to find a story and theme that will work in your situation. Depending on the context, it could be something like, “Where do you find forgiveness?” or “How can you be forgiven?” It could also be tied to a really local theme rather than a national or people-group theme. For example, every three years our town hosts an idol festival that advertises itself as “welcoming the king.” A little imagination could produce a related theme for Christians to talk about and eight or so stories that relate to that theme. To evaluate if your opening seeker story is a good one, check that it links to all your eight stories and then go out and experiment with local people.

**Conclusion**

I am so thankful that God forced me to start out on this journey to storytelling. Besides all the blessings of seeing people grow as disciples and in their understanding, I too have benefitted hugely. I now truly know large sections of Scripture. I find myself meditating on the stories every day so that they change me before I pass them on. The people in the stories both inspire me and warn me of things I should not do. The impact the stories have had on me excites me to share what I’ve discovered with others.

When my journey began, I thought that storytelling was just an evangelistic tool. Soon I realised that it was simultaneously a path to discipleship. Now I use stories every day for all aspects of ministry including pastoral care, preaching, evangelism, discipleship, and leadership training. It is a tool I would not want to do without. Can I encourage you to come and join me on this journey?

**Further resources**

www.storyingthescriptures.com

A forum and accountability group can be found on Facebook. Search for “storying the scriptures” and request permission to join. Once accepted you can ask any of your FB friends to join.

**NOTES**

1 Service on its own is not enough. It needs to have the good news explained alongside it or people might mistakenly believe we’re doing good deeds because we’re “nice” people or to earn a reward. It also provides leadership training because from day one it gives good and bad models of leaders and shows the consequences. Later in the discipleship process, after a person has heard many stories, you can make this more explicit.

2 See the following url for materials he has produced: https://www.bibletelling.org/ and http://www.btstoriestories.com (accessed 14 October 2015).

3 For more information see: http://simplythestory.org/oralbiblestories/ (accessed 9 November 2015).

4 English versions of these basic fourteen stories can be found at my website, www.storyingthescriptures.com/bible-overview/. The stories in Chinese can be found at www.youtube/LuTszLi.

5 See www.storyingthescriptures.com for more details.

6 If people in the group are illiterate, you can have them nominate a “reader”. Within about four weeks they should remember all the questions. Please adjust everything for your context.

7 For more information, see the following url: http://storyingthescriptures.com/the-benefits-of-not-answering-peoples-questions/ (accessed 9 November 2015).

8 Interestingly, while it took the missionary team several weeks to think through and choose the stories they felt would be suitable, the local pastor took less than ten minutes to tell us his choice. We were relieved that he reached the same decisions we had come to.

9 While our story only covers Genesis 3:1–15, the whole of Genesis 1–4 is available in a mini-Bible. Similarly, while Moses is covered in two short stories, two mini-Bibles provide much more of the early exodus story including the crossing of the Red Sea and the wilderness wanderings. As handing a person a Bible may scare them away, the mini-Bible is designed to “wean” them so they can read the full Bible. In addition, since many people will try to read the Bible from the first chapter as they would a normal book, we find that they often become bored and give up by the time they read Exodus 21.
What resources are needed to spread the gospel to the working class people in central Taiwan? That’s one of the questions asked by the members of the newly established OMF/Word Team ministry in Chiayi City back in 2002. Members of the team had attended the Jonathan project in Thailand and were challenged to think creatively about what might need to be developed. We recognised the power and relevance of Bible storying within the local culture but also realized that Taiwan has a very high literacy rate. We therefore longed that, in addition to hearing Bible stories, people might read the Bible themselves.

The team had started a working class men’s group that met around a traditional tea set. The men—very unchurched—smoked, chewed beetle nut, and drank tea while the missionaries built relationships and told Bible stories. It was hard to imagine such men showing an interest in reading the Bible, but as they became familiar with the stories some did ask about reading them for themselves. There was a problem though, made clear by one of the men who picked up a large, thick Chinese Bible, flicked through it dismissively and pointing to the thin paper and small characters said, “No one would want to read that. It’s too boring and has too many words!” His actual words were less polite, but we got the point! He then suggested that we should have “smaller” Bibles and pointed us to some of the literature being distributed in the local temples. These were all pocket-sized booklets with large print, not too many pages, and featured a few pictures or illustrations.

This experience led to the production of a series of mini-Bibles. Working with the Taiwan Bible Society we first printed a small Bible portion of Genesis 1–4. This was an obvious choice as we frequently used these stories in evangelism. Selecting a contemporary version of the Chinese Bible made it much more readable to working class non-Christians (though somewhat less acceptable to established Christians!). There

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**Mini-Bibles**

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**Mini-Bible covers**
were no changes or additions to the text, but chapter and verse numbers were omitted (which again ensured these Scripture portions would not be so popular with established churches). The first cover was designed by a local artist, but later versions featured a Chinese-styled design that was devised by one of our own missionaries. The mini-Bibles were non-intimidating for less confident readers—including the missionaries—and were easy to use in a more casual setting. Furthermore, the Taiwan Bible Society has been very positive about our taking the initiative to produce new materials.

Over the years more mini-Bibles have been printed and some have been reprinted. Each is around 25 to 40 pages long and 10 x 15 cm wide and high. Generally they are Bible portions—in some cases selected so that whole stories are told with repetitions and other material removed. Subjects include Creation, Abraham, Moses, the exodus, the early stories from Daniel, the birth narratives of Jesus, selected parables from Luke, and the crucifixion. Each is given a culturally relevant title such as: “Who understands my pain?,” “The dream interpreter,” and “Finding a benevolent Father.”

One booklet is a “Where to find help with ...” guide, similar to what is found in Gideon Bibles, except that the relevant texts are written in full. Topics include: “help when you are looking for peace,” “help in financial crisis,” and “help when experiencing sexual temptation.”

The cover of the February 1938 issue of China’s Millions records Frank England’s use of gospel posters while preaching in Zhejiang.

As the booklets have been paid for by project donations, we can make them available for free or a small donation. They are published by the Taiwan Bible Society on behalf of OMF/World Team. The Moses story was recently sponsored by Send International. This is a very simple but practical way of making God’s word accessible to those who would never dream of opening up a full Bible or even New Testament.
Stories exert influence. They can shape people's religion and their thinking.

In our education and in our training as Christian workers in Asia we have to study the various religious faiths of the people around us. As adults we concentrate on their philosophical and theological beliefs, comparing and contrasting these with our Christian faith. But perhaps we need to ask how followers of these faiths have gained their religious worldview and so walk in their sandals.

Adult faith and practice is often based on what we have learned as children. Thus Jewish children are brought up with the story of the Passover, Exodus, and the giving of the Torah. The telling and enactment of these stories predetermine all later development of faith and self-understanding.

What we learn as children plays a significant part in determining our adult views.

It is interesting in Western contexts how our politicians and the media may use a heart-rending story to move public opinion in the desired direction. Thus the story of one horrendously sick person’s sufferings moves people to support euthanasia. Just one such story can gain greater influence than carefully thought-through arguments.

**Biblical Teaching**

Jewish teaching has always come in two forms—Halachah and Haggadah. This Jewish approach has of course influenced biblical teaching and should shape our use of Scripture.

Halachah is direct theoretical teaching and particularly the demands of the Law—“Do this! Don't do that!” In the New Testament we find considerable halachic teaching in the Epistles, but we may also find sections of halachic teaching in the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Western theology and preaching tend to prefer such halachic approaches and may even teach that we should base our theology on the Epistles—particularly Paul’s writings—although post-modern society may feel more at home in biblical stories and in the Johannine emphasis on knowing God in an intimate personal relationship.

Haggadah includes teaching through stories which may be historical or more parabolic. It can also include dramatic acts like a prophet burying a cloth until it rots or lying on one’s side for a long time. It is of course now an accepted truth that the Gospels and Acts are not just historical works, but also have theological axes to grind. Our traditional creeds fail in this respect—“born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified ...” Was there nothing of importance between the virgin birth and the crucifixion of Jesus? In this way we ignore half the New Testament! And in our more existential world perhaps the stories of the Gospels might reveal Jesus the Messiah more relevantly.

If we were to visit a Jewish bookshop and ask if they have any Haggadah, they would take us to a shelf with copies of the Passover liturgy. The actions of the liturgy in the context of a delicious meal form the heart of Jewish teaching. Christians have something...
parallel in the acted symbolism of baptism and Communion services. But it is a challenge to us to rethink our worship patterns, asking ourselves whether they contain sufficient acted, visible teaching.

We may note that the Epistles contain haggadic teaching with the stories of Abraham, and James’ references to the tongue, rudder, etc. Likewise the Gospels and Acts include passages of less pictorial halachic teaching. But it is always haggadic teaching which grabs people’s attention and which people remember.

**Not Just Biblical Stories**

I have been in various conferences with seminars on story telling. With much rejoicing I always attend such seminars, but again and again have found them disappointing. They have only dealt with the need to make Bible stories contextually relevant and interesting. Of course it is vitally important that we learn to tell Bible stories really well. But this is nothing new. Sunday School teachers have always tried to bring Bible stories to life and relate them to the children’s context. Kenneth Bailey and others have already been helping us for many years to contextualise biblical stories and make them religiously and culturally relevant.¹

When I worked in Southeast Asia back in the early 1960s, I much enjoyed using Asianised versions of Paul White’s Jungle Doctor stories.² I quickly discovered that local men loved to listen to such stories and they would stay listening even for an hour. Often they then returned to their village or housing area and retold my stories, so my Jungle Stories became widely known. South Thailand men loved the stories of the egg-stealing snake with its refrain of “Be sure your sin will find you out” and the one of the peanut farmer that illustrates that God could and did become human. Since our return to England I have found the peanut farmer can also fit Christmas celebrations ideally.

**Different cultures tell stories in somewhat different ways...**

Jewish story telling often has a sudden unexpected twist at the end, while Korean stories are more drawn-out. Russian stories can seem rather morose. Chinese stories tend to illustrate ethical realities. So some cultural adaptation may prove useful even in telling stories.

Most cultures enjoy traditional stories which can be used to teach basic biblical truths. Some cultures even have stories which seek to explain the origin of the world or of evil. For example, the story of the origin of the Kiwi relates well in New Zealand as a background to good teaching on sin and salvation. In many traditions an animal becomes a much-loved character. So in Indonesia there are lovely stories about a mousedeer (Sang Kancil). In Europe old fables used to be widely read and told to children. Such writers as Lafontaine in France, Krylov in Russia, the Danish Hans Christian Andersen, and the German Grimm brothers come to mind. The stories of traditional pantomimes and fairy tales can be beautifully related to the good news of Jesus the Messiah.

**Using Stories**

Some Christian workers may have a special gift as story tellers or may develop this art as a special ministry, but all of us can learn to tell stories. Many of us have sat on a sofa telling a story to small children or when they are tucked up in bed. As Christian workers we can enjoy telling stories in all sorts of contexts to adults as well as to children. When travelling in a taxi together with the driver and three other passengers we can ask them whether they have heard a certain story. When they look surprised and curious we can launch into one of our stories. When waiting by a bus stop or visiting someone’s home, a story can be introduced and people love to listen. In any and every context a story is always welcome.

Of course stories can be used with great effect in situations where it is illegal or dangerous to indulge in direct preaching or witness. Stories can quietly introduce people to more biblical religious approaches and so induce further questions about the Christian faith.

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**Conclusion**

May we in OMF become known throughout Asia as a story-telling mission! Don’t be shy! Start with just a couple of stories which you can prepare well with interesting vocabulary, attractive interaction with your audience, good use of the voice, and other oratorical skills. And God, by his Spirit, will use our stories for his glory and for the salvation and edification of the people with whom we live and work.

**NOTES**

² For an introduction to Paul White and his stories, see: http://www.jungledoctorcomics.com/ (accessed 5 February 2016).
Reviewed by Walter McConnell

One of the highlights of the history of the China Inland Mission was the great turning of the Lisu tribe of Southwest China to Christ in the early decades of the twentieth century. This people movement, well recorded in the pages of *China’s Millions* and the works of Leila Cooke and Isobel Kuhn, impacted the whole of Lisu society so that entire families and villages turned from the worship of demons to the worship of Christ. Today, of the approximately 700,000 Lisu who live in China, at least half profess to follow Jesus. Many more Christian Lisu can be found in Thailand, Myanmar, and India.

The evangelization of the Lisu was so Scripture based that early believers were often known as “students of the book.” J. O. Fraser’s development of a phonetic script for this people who previously had no written language prepared the way for the Bible to be translated into Lisu as well as a catechism and a series of hymn books. Hymn singing—in four-part harmony—quickly became one of the distinguishing marks of this movement. In a recent PhD dissertation, Aminta Arrington has examined the reality that even though the Lisu have been taught that the Bible is the authoritative word of God, believe that it is central to the Christian faith, and possess a translation in their own language, they remain at their core an oral culture and thus read Scripture for liturgical rather than personal or devotional purposes. What, she asks, sustains the spiritual life of a people who have the Bible but rarely read it as individuals? How can major theological concepts like grace and sanctification and forgiveness be passed on in an oral context? Her answer is that these things are mediated through song. As she puts it, “The Lisu hymns serve as a theological mediator for Lisu Christians, bridging the gap between the text-intensive religion that is Christianity, and the oral world of Lisu culture” (ii).

Potential readers need not fear that since this is a doctoral dissertation it will be way over their heads. Arrington usually writes in a narrative style that, while sometimes a bit repetitive, is often marked by striking verbal imagery that draws us into the history of the Lisu church and current state of the church along the upper Nujiang (Salween) valley where she did her field work. That said, many readers may prefer to give chapter 2, “Methods and Procedures,” a miss, unless they want to bone up on ethnographic technique.

The study begins with a narrative of a modern Easter festival when more than 400 Lisu Christians assembled for worship and moves on to four chapters devoted to a history of their church. While much of the historical information emerges from the accounts recorded by early missionaries, Arrington provides some details of the “quiet years” when many Lisu moved out of the Nujiang valley and some reported that they stopped believing because it was illegal. She then discusses the reestablishment and growth of the church after 1980. Readers will be puzzled by the claim (made by the Lisu themselves) that no one believed during the years 1958–1980. We are left wondering whether there was an actual suspension of belief or if only the open practice of the faith was curtailed. As the author does not pursue this issue, further research is desperately needed.

Three chapters address how Lisu social structure has impacted its relationship with Christianity. While group solidarity is well known to have been an important factor during
the original people movement, we are shown that more recently conversions have come through individual decisions. Nevertheless, the importance of group identity is confirmed. One sign of this is the prohibition of smoking and drinking which should not be understood as legalism but as a sign of solidarity that sets Lisu Christians apart from the surrounding culture.

The final major section of the work turns to ethnodoxology—the study of a culture's worship. Here the author addresses orality, ethnic identity, and especially hymnody which she finds to be perhaps the most important aspect of Lisu church life. As they learn to sing they learn to read their own language and have the door opened to reading the Bible—even if that only takes place during formal services. Their singing enhances solidarity with other believers. And since few of them read the Bible for study or devotions, their songs connect this oral people most closely with the textual world of Christianity and remain the main source of their theology. The significance of this conclusion cannot be underestimated. And yet, as helpful as this is, one would like more information about the role of group dancing within Lisu worship and their identity as Christians. From the liturgical reading and preaching of the text of Scripture, to the singing of their faith, to acting it out through dance, the Lisu live out their Christianity using multiple modes of communication.

I will gladly recommend Arrington's study to those who work in tribal settings or with members of other predominantly oral cultures. It will help many thinking through the intricacies of orality and textuality navigate through dangerous eddies. As it constructively fills in some blanks about the Lisu church, it pushes us beyond concentrating on one tribe to considering how God may work in similar cultures. While hymnody translated from Western sources played a critical role with the Lisu, it may not be major feature used by God in the growth of other churches. And for that reason, we should resolutely aim to discover whatever methods God might use to bridge the gap between oral cultures and our inescapably

textual faith and make sure to apply the right methods to our situation.

**CIM/OMF books on the Lisu church**


Isobel Kuhn, *In the Arena* (Chicago: Moody, 1958).


*Second Mile People* (Sevenoaks: OMF, 1982).

*Stones of Fire* (Singapore: OMF, 1984).


**Theses on the Lisu church**


Yi-Deh Yao (饒以德), *From Yunnan to Northern Thailand: The Transition of China Inland Mission’s Lisu Evangelical Work in the 1950s* (從雲南到泰北: 一九五零年代中國內地會傈僳族傳教工作的轉向) (Master’s Thesis, National Taiwan University, 2014).

From the beginning, CIM missionaries encouraged local evangelists to teach and preach the gospel and distribute Christian literature.
It is important to remember that though the gospel can be summarized, its message must not be truncated or watered down lest we run the danger of delivering what the Apostle Paul would call “a different gospel” (2 Cor 11:4; Gal 1:6–9).

The need to communicate the gospel accurately to diverse people calls for diligence on multiple levels. It first requires that we correctly retell the story God gives us in the pages of Scripture. The good news of Jesus is not a list of doctrines that must be accepted, but a story of a man who must be encountered and believed. As McGrath rightly states, “Scripture does not primarily take the form of creedal and doctrinal statements ... Its primary ... concern is with narrating what happened at moments held to be of particular importance to the self-definition of the community of faith—moments such as the exodus from Egypt or the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.” But even though the preaching of the gospel requires an oral act, it cannot be separated from its source—the text of Scripture. That the best Bible storytellers instinctively keep to the text demonstrates that orality and textuality exist, not in opposition, but in a dynamic relationship through which God’s written words speak to human hearts as we verbalize them.

Second, to tell people God’s story, we must know their hearts and minds. And to do this, we need to know their stories and their worldview. This was well known by James Legge, the great LMS missionary who served in Malacca and Hong Kong from 1840–1873 and later became the first Professor of Chinese at Oxford University. Early in his career he was convinced “that he should not be able to consider himself qualified for the duties of his position, until he had thoroughly mastered the Classical Books of the Chinese, and had investigated for himself the whole field of thought through which the sages of China had ranged, and in which were to be found the foundations of the moral, social, and political life of the people.” As he could not find adequate English translations of these works he determined to do the work himself. The foundations he laid by rendering numerous Chinese classics into English equipped succeeding generations of missionaries to engage the Chinese thought world and see how the gospel could be communicated in a way they understood. The point of this challenging illustration is that in our enthusiasm for telling stories we need to understand how our listeners will understand the stories we tell. What stories have influenced their thought world and how? What do they listen for in a story? How will that impact what they hear from our stories? How will their preconceptions and prejudices influence their receptiveness to new ideas? Only those who know a people and their stories and worldview will be able to do this well.

Both of these points lead to a third. Gospel stories should never be told just because we want to tell a story. Since the Bible is God’s word, Bible stories are God’s stories. Anyone who tells his stories should make sure that they have a firm grasp of what God wanted to say and that they only use them to teach what God wanted to teach. Anyone who has given a devotional at a school assembly or a children’s sermon at church knows how difficult it is to tell a Bible story to young children in a way that engages their minds, gives them an application point that they can act upon, and is faithful to the biblical author’s intention. This explains why so many children’s talks use Bible stories as a springboard for moral exhortation. “Jesus says that we should be nice to others, obey our parents, tell the truth, and do our homework well.” If that is what Jesus actually wished to teach, we should be sure to teach it, but we should never allow a story to be interpreted in a way that subverts its original intent. This requires that we do intense spadework as we select stories to tell. The question should never be, “What do you think this...
While the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, to many it sounds like foolishness. Even the best storytellers cannot evade this truth. As in everything else, when we tell stories we need to learn from and trust in the great Storyteller who uses our feeble words to accomplish what he desires them to accomplish.

May this issue of Mission Round Table challenge and inspire you to tell the old, old story about Jesus to others around you who need to know of his glory and his love. As you read, you will discover a number of photos spread throughout the issue of missionaries using some tried and true methods of sharing the good news of Jesus. Which methods might work best in your setting? Are you making use of them?

Tell me the old, old story
Of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and his love.
Tell me the story simply,
As to a little child;
For I am weak and weary,
And helpless and defiled.

Tell me the story slowly,
That I may take it in -
That wonderful redemption,
God's remedy for sin.
Tell me the story often,
For I forget so soon;
The early dew of morning
Has passed away at noon.

Tell me the same old story
When you have cause to fear
That this world's empty glory
Is costing me too dear.
Tell me the story always,
If you would really be,
In any time of trouble,
A comforter to me.

Tell Me the Old, Old Story
By Kate Hankey

Walter McConnell
Mission Round Table

NOTES
Recommended Books

Telling the Gospel through Story: Evangelism that Keeps Hearers wanting More

What could keep a sun-starved European family away from a tropical beach during the last precious hours of their holiday? *Telling the Gospel through Story* begins with the author’s experience of telling the complete salvation story to this family as they begged for more after each and every section. Their interest in the story meant that the beach was forgotten. From the very beginning, readers will engage with the book’s convincing arguments for using this method of evangelism, learn the practicalities of how to do it, and receive encouragement to train others as well.

Dillon is a skilled teacher who has produced a book that is at once practical, readable, and encouraging. Rather than providing us with all the stories we should use, she passes on skills that will help us choose and prepare stories from the biblical text that will help us in our situation. She further informs us of some of the potential pitfalls we might face. Since a story is only as good as its telling, she then tackles some of the barriers to using stories for evangelism.

The author’s wide experience enables her to lead us through a series of associated topics in a helpful and practical way: following up a story with questions, leading a discussion, motivating and training others to tell stories, sharing stories with those of different faiths or worldviews, and telling stories with Bible study and church groups.

The book is punctuated with illustrations from the personal experiences of the author and her colleagues that tell how different people have been touched by stories in various situations. Readers will find it a great way to get started in storytelling or improve skills they already have so that they can more effectively share the greatest story of them all. As Dillon concludes, storytelling is “a natural, appealing way to communicate the gospel, and once you get started, people actually want to hear more.”

A Chinese translation of the book has recently been released.

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Storytelling: Sharing the Gospel with Passion and Power

The challenge to connect with those who are indifferent to, prejudiced against, or openly hostile to the good news of Jesus is something with which many of us grapple. How do we bring this vital message in a way that opens hearts and minds rather than closing them more tightly? In *Storytelling*, Martin Goldsmith shows how God has used both his Jewish upbringing and his life experiences to shape his approach in sharing the gospel through stories. The years he and his wife spent in a number of South East Asian countries greatly impacted their development as storytellers and taught them how to practice it effectively. Here Goldsmith shares many of these insights, often with humour, to stimulate us to think not only about how we communicate but also about how what we say is received and understood through the cultural filter of our listeners. Whether adapting stories from the Bible, folk stories from the culture, or his own or others’ personal stories, the author encourages us to always listen with the ears and heart of those to whom we are speaking.