



## THE CASE & CALL FOR ORAL BIBLES

### A KEY COMPONENT IN COMPLETING THE GREAT COMMISSION



#### RICK LEATHERWOOD

Rick Leatherwood is the author of *Glory in Mongolia*, William Carey Library, 2006, and is the director of Kairos International. He and his wife Laura live in Ethiopia. You may contact Rick at: [kairos.rick@gmail.com/](mailto:kairos.rick@gmail.com) or [www.oralbibles.org](http://www.oralbibles.org)

In 2006, the late Avery Willis, former vice president of the Southern Baptist's International Mission Board and founder of the International Orality Network, stood before 40 missionaries in northern Iraq and began his talk by saying, "For forty years I did it wrong." I was amazed. I had no idea what orality was and didn't really care. I had simply come to the seminar to hear Avery Willis. He was one of the biggest names in missions and yet here was Avery beginning his presentation saying he had done it wrong for 40 years! Without exception Avery had our attention as he turned and drew a circle on the white board and asked, "What is that?" and we all said, "Circle." He then drew a square and asked, "What is that?" and we all said, "Square." Then he drew a triangle and we all said, "Triangle." Avery turned around and looked at us and said, "You say that because you are literate. If you were a non-literate person you might see a ball, a block, and a pyramid, because non-literate people do not think in abstract terms like literate people do. When we learn to read, something happens in our brain and we begin to think in more abstract terms." Two years later I was conducting my first orality workshop in Liberia, West Africa, which is 80% non-literate, and I drew a big circle on the chalkboard and asked what is that? Everyone said, "Ball." Hum. Then I drew a square and asked, "What is that?" and everyone said, "Block," just like Avery had said. The point is if we come to people preaching the gospel using circles and squares (abstract concepts) and they are thinking in terms of balls and blocks (concreteness), we don't communicate in a form the people understand, and this was the 'wrong' that Avery was talking about.

Jesus was literate. But He knew the vast majority of the people listening to him were not literate. So He did not speak to the people in high abstract terms. He taught them through storytelling. He taught them through the concrete stories of fishing and farming, vineyard owners and laborers, merchants, pearls, hidden treasure, wheat, tares, nets, tax collectors and Pharisees. Jesus was the master storyteller whether it was about a moneylender and his debtors, a rich man and a beggar, two sons, an unjust steward, and on and on. Even when Jesus talked to a religious expert, someone who was obviously literate and could quote the Scriptures, Jesus told the expert of the law the story about the Good Samaritan. Nothing too abstract here- a Levite, a priest, a Samaritan, robbers, an inn keeper, two coins. Where did this story come from? It came from the mind of Jesus, as He graciously gave the expert in the law the direction he needed to leave his racial prejudice and religious hypocrisy behind and "go and do" as the Samaritan had done.

Storytelling is the fastest growing method of evangelism and discipleship in the world today. It is effective and people like it. Jesus said, "You are truly my disciples if you continue in my word." Jn. 8:31. You and I have become disciples by reading the word

of God and following its teaching. But what if someone cannot read? Jesus did not say, “Go and make disciples of everyone who can read.” He said, “Go and make disciples of all nations,” whether they can read or whether they cannot read. Sixty five percent of the world’s population is not literate. Most of those living within the unreached peoples in the world today are oral learners. If we are going to reach oral learners with the gospel we must use oral strategies. Missionaries all over the world who are serious about making disciples of oral learners are now engaging in storytelling.

But more than just storytelling is needed. A few stories here, a few stories there, people get excited . . . and then time passes. Where is the continuity and sustainability needed to make disciples? These are two very important components to spiritual growth. Where is the breadth of vision that is needed for people to come to really know God and His purposes so that they can participate with Him and find true meaning in life? Storytelling as it is being practiced on many mission fields today creates ‘story sets’ which deal with topics such as leadership, evangelism, marriage, women’s issues, poverty, sickness, demons, men’s issues, etc. But where is the big picture that provides the needed continuity and sustainability? It is in making an oral Bible.

So just what is an oral Bible? An oral Bible is the recording of a core set of stories of the whole Bible from Genesis to Revelation that gives the chronological panorama of God’s word as it unfolds in the most central, essential, and fundamental stories of the Bible. It is not a summary nor is it a children’s Bible. An oral Bible is the word of God. Great pains are taken to maintain the integrity of the Scriptures. Nothing is added or expounded. It is not embellished or expanded upon in any way. It is a selected portion of stories from God’s word which non-literate people can understand better than they can understand the abstract portions of Scripture such as Paul’s epistles.

An oral Bible is more than a story set of 6 to 10 stories dealing with a particular issue. It is a story set of 70 stories that gives the whole overview of the purpose of God

from beginning to end. Not too many. Not too few. The International Mission Board is one of the leaders in the storytelling movement and has prepared more than 180 stories. But 180 stories is a lot for a native who doesn’t wear clothes living down on the border of Ethiopia and Kenya to try to get his mind around. By keeping the story set short in an oral Bible (60-70 stories), the end can be clearly seen from the beginning and even non-literate people can see and understand the plan of God. After that more stories can be added.

In speaking of oral Bibles a moment is needed to note the difference between an oral Bible and an audio Bible such as Faith Comes by Hearing (FCBH) is producing in many parts of the world. The audio Bible produced by FCBH is a dramatized recording of the New Testament onto a cassette tape or an audio player. But the text for audio

Bibles such as FCBH produces comes from a written New Testament which has been translated and approved by Wycliffe or a Bible Society. The problem here is that Bible translation is a long, time-consuming process. Wycliffe says it will take at least another 25 years to even start a written translation in the languages of all the peoples that need one. It can then take another 20 years or more after work begins to complete each of these translations. But an oral Bible beginning from Genesis and not just the New Testament, can be quickly produced from the written translation of the local trade language, which has already been completed by Wycliffe or a Bible Society. In Liberia we made oral

Bibles in 16 languages in just 18 months. So the oral Bible is not dependent on 45 years of future new translations. It takes what is there in the previously completed translation of the trade language, and building on the years of hard work to produce that translation, records a selection of stories orally into the mother tongue of the unreached tribe. This would be similar to someone translating a message of a visiting preacher. However the added advantage of the oral Bible is the oral Bible is done by a team in a group setting, rather than the translation coming through just one person as in the case of a message being translated from a guest speaker.

Another difference between an oral Bible and an audio Bible is that the stories recorded in an oral Bible have been crafted for reproducibility. Instead of recording the whole text (as is done in an audio Bible) the stories in

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an oral bible have been shortened. The story of David and Goliath is a good example. The written text includes the details of Goliath's clothing, his armor, the weight of his spear, etc. Are these details important to the main point of the story? Is knowing these details essential for becoming a mature Christian? Including all the written details makes a story hard to reproduce in an oral form. If the story is not orally reproducible, the good news that a man has risen from the dead does not spread among unreached, non-literate people. Therefore in order to make the stories reproducible, an oral Bible keeps the heart of a story but omits unessential details like Goliath's clothing, enabling the stories to be remembered and retold. As Bruce Wilkinson of Walk Through The Bible said, "We try to get our stories down to the irreducible minimum." Exactly. To get an idea of a complete 70 story set and the text used to create an oral Bible, go to [www.oralbibles.org](http://www.oralbibles.org).

So a team of 5-6 native speakers of a given language, who also know how to read their trade language, take on the task of providing the Scriptures orally for their tribesmen who can't read. These 5-6 native speakers learn two or more Bible stories a day, taken from the written text of the Bible in the trade language. With such a team, usually an oral Bible of 60-70 stories from creation to Revelation can be recorded in a week. First the group sits together in the morning discussing the key terminology of the stories they will be telling in their mother tongue that day. Their goal is to find the best way to say this word or that one in their language. They collaborate as a group discussing the word's meaning in the context of the passage until they all come to agreement. Then each one studies their story using the group's consensus of the correct terminology or as is more often the case, the best phraseology, and then with one of their team members listening to check for accuracy, they tell their story in their mother tongue as it is being recorded. The oral Bible then goes through another important check as it is edited. With a native speaker listening to the recordings while following the written text, the editor makes any changes necessary, making sure the oral story agrees with the written word in the Scriptures. Together the editor and the recorder then arrange the stories in chronological order. The recording is then put onto one of the solar

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powered audio players that are now on the market or onto an SD card to be used in cell phones."

And so we come to the question of distribution. Who gets the players? From what I've observed, at present, the practice is to get a player into a village so that all can use it. But let me ask you a question. When you are ready to read the word of God, do you want to begin by taking an hour out to go down the block searching from house to house to find which one of your neighbors has the Bible? No. Your spirit is calling for the word of God to come into your soul right at that moment, so you take your readily accessible printed Bible and begin to read. Historian Paul Johnson records that in the 1630s and the years following, every home in Boston had a Bible, and that Bible was being read on a daily basis giving guidance and direction and consensus to the settlers living there as they tried to live by God's word. This is discipleship. The same will be true for people who do not read. Oral

Bibles need to be available to every household that wants one.

The church in the 20th Century did a wonderful job of getting the cost of printed Bibles into hundreds of languages down to around \$3 per Bible, providing access to the word of God for millions of people all over the world. As we move closer to completing the Great Commission in the 21st Century, the church must come to grips with the fact that the word of God needs to go into every

home that wants it. The cost of solar players must come down from the present \$15-\$60 price range to \$5. If the secular world can put a calculator on the market for \$3, surely it is possible for the church to get solar powered players containing an oral Bible into every non-literate person's home for \$5.

Our commission is to "go and make disciples," but it is pretty difficult to make disciples without the word of God. It is surely time for the whole translation component of the church to take a major step toward reaching every tribe and tongue with the word of God by creating oral Bibles. It is good to see Wycliffe moving more and more into the creation of oral Bibles as well through a project called "One Story." Without doubt oral Bibles are the best way forward to make disciples of the non-literate unreached peoples of the world by bringing them the word of God in a form they can understand. 