



Passing on the Truth: When Methods Supersede the Message

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It's remarkable how attached we often become to what's familiar. We feel comfortable when we know how to do something well – whether or not that “something” fits the needs of others around us.

For example, a missionary friend from Asia e-mailed me several months ago in response to my *Mission Frontiers* column on debt and training (see *MF*, March–April 2003, page 22). He wrote, “You rightly noted that most training is Western-based. However, it is my observation here in Asia that if you tried to change what has now become the status quo, you would receive a lot of resistance from the Asians The patterns of education brought in from the West have now become the standard.

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This not only applies to biblical studies but also to secular education.”

That brings to mind the old quote, “Don't let school get in the way of your education.” Of course, that idea pits one approach

to learning against another. Value can be found in various kinds of training: from formal to informal to non-formal. Problems arise when we assume that one approach is the only way to learn—or even worse, that the same method works in every culture.

When one method is considered superior—say, classroom lecture or preaching style—that model is exported, for good or for ill, all over the globe. Since this is the way most of us in the West were educated, it's natural that we use it when we set up training in other places.

Naturally, those we train, often train others the same way. If we look at it objectively, we realize that this often doesn't work well. No one knows how many Western and non-Western missionaries trained in Western methods—even if they were

trained in, say, Asia—try to go into a culture that is primarily oral, for example, and teach people with classrooms and desks. (For more on communication to primarily oral learners, see pages 14-15 of this issue of *MF*.) And even some North American cultures are becoming more and more visual in learning style.

I'll never forget the time I was riding with others from around the world on the way from an airport to an international “missions” event. One conference participant was talking in the van with another and pointed out that, in at least one part of Africa, all the Christian women have a Bible—which often matches their dress color—but “they can't read it”, he said. They bring it with them to church each week, but never open it during the week.

Since he worked for a ministry that produces audio cassettes, he had a bias. What he failed to mention was that when the same folks get an audio cassette of the Bible, they often can't afford to keep it because it's too valuable! So a pastor or head of household has a choice: keep this audio tape or feed my family today by selling the tape. If someone has the whole Bible on tape, the set might last a year, with one cassette sold at a time.

If any oral communication depends on “hardware” like a cassette, it stalls the spread of truth. If someone has to use even a picture that he can't draw himself, the story won't spread.

I acknowledge that each of my illustrations over-emphasizes a point. Tools and methods do have their place in training. Yet we must squarely face the fact that too often we export approaches that may be acceptable in the West, but that are not necessarily good elsewhere. In fact, in some situations they have clearly proved to be detrimental. 🌐



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