

The Urgency of God

I.E. We Could be Going Faster

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Is there an urgent nature in the character of God? Let's see. God tells Abraham to go, leave, leave, and go all in one verse, Gen. 12:1. Then in Ex. 14:1 God tells Israel to **turn**, as in right now! Jesus said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like... **As soon as** the grain is ripe, the laborer puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come." Mk. 4:26-29. The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few. **Beseech** the Lord of the harvest. Matt. 9:37. No doubt there are **many, many** more verses revealing the urgency of God.

To build on the sub-title a little more we might ask, could we be going faster toward making disciples of all nations? "But" you say, "making disciples takes

time." Yes it does. But does it take years? Does it take a lifetime? Or does it take a basic foundational skill accompanied by a choice? Jesus said, "You are truly my disciples if you continue in my word." John 8:31. But it's pretty hard to continue in His word if you don't know how to read. And the truth is that **over half the people in the world in the year 2022, do not know how to read.** What have we been doing? The world has gone to the moon and beyond and yet has inadvertently left over half of the people in the world in abject, illiterate poverty.

To apply this to the context of missions, let's look at the question again. "What have we been doing?" In the Jan. 2021 edition of *Mission Frontiers*, I wrote, "There is a blind spot in missions today. Omitting the factor of literacy training as an essential feature toward making disciples of all nations has been overlooked." I have a friend who is an excellent church-planter working in one of the more difficult and dangerous areas in the world. He and his wife are well-trained nationals of their country and have planted over 40 churches in four different languages. One of their key tools for discipleship is the booklet of chronological Bible stories I put together and had translated into the largest of this brother's language groups. When asking him how things were going, he said, "The story books of the Word of God you gave us are excellent for making disciples, **if** the learner can go home and re-read the stories over again. But the illiterate believers lack the confidence to try and tell the stories to others for evangelism."

Though many missionaries using storytelling to make disciples of oral learners may disagree with me, I believe there is a limit to how much an illiterate person in the 21st century can be disciplined by expecting them to remember 60-100 stories for a long period of time. In June of 2021, I was conducting a Teacher Training Workshop (TTW) in Liberia, training believers and pastors how to teach literacy. In order to reinforce the importance of what we would be doing, I asked, "How many of you attended the storytelling seminar my wife and I taught here 14 years ago?" Several people raised their hands. So I asked, "How many of the oral learners who took the course with you would

remember all those stories today?” One pastor raised his hand with the obvious answer, “None.”

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“I agree with you,” I said. “In addition to teaching storytelling, **how much farther along and how much better might those people’s lives be right now if I had started literacy classes by conducting TTWs then, so you and other literate believers could teach the oral learners to read and write?** And the most amazing thing is that the methodology we will be presenting to you today (developed by Literacy Evangelism International) enables an adult to learn to read and write their language in just four months!” Sound impossible?



Six months later, in Dec. 2021, my wife and I returned to Liberia, and were in the midst of conducting another three-day Teacher Training

Workshop in Monrovia, when our leaders asked if we could let a former student speak. We then listened to the testimony of a 49 year old woman named Pricilla **who had never been to school and six months ago was totally illiterate.** But having gone through our literacy course she can now read and write. Pricilla then read to us the story of Peter raising Dorcas from the dead from Acts 9. This was a rather fitting passage which she had selected as a woman who was dead to being able to read just six months before. She had to stop a couple of times while reading to look at a word closely before reading the word and continuing on. She was a very sweet woman. We asked her what she was going to do now and she said she wants to become a teaching assistant in one of our next classes and to go to college. It was a beautiful moment and we nodded our heads in wonder. Our leaders then told us there were others like her who had also learned to read.

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A mission pastor in the USA began looking more closely at what we were advocating and sent an email to some of his workers on the field asking them what they thought. One missionary working with oral learners replied, “Oh, it (reading) doesn’t matter.” When the mission pastor forwarded the note to me, I sent him a one word reply. Just one word. **Really?** However that one word reply seemed to speak volumes as the lights went on in his mind. He invited us to come conduct a three-day TTW to short term workers from his church who are going to the field so they can **train national believers in that country who are literate** how to teach their

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illiterate brothers and sisters to read and write so they too can live the abundant life that Jesus came to give us.

What we are looking at is a model of how **we can accelerate** movements toward finishing the Great Commission **by implementing literacy classes** for believers and unbelievers who don't yet read and write. In this way the discipleship can be more thorough, sustainable and life changing as new readers and new believers can begin to read the Bible for themselves. The other key feature is that after going through a Teacher Training Workshop this methodology is so simple that students can quickly become teachers. So the literacy classes are taught by national believers in a strategy called “near neighbor evangelism.” You probably never thought of literacy being an evangelistic strategy. Me neither. Now I see literacy training as one of the most potent and godly of all evangelistic methodologies we have available today. I borrow from my *MF* article in Jan. 2021:

There are many issues in the world of missions today. One that is not often mentioned is the low self-esteem of perhaps 400 million men who are the heads of their households yet do not know how to read. John the Baptist cried out, 'Every valley shall be lifted up.' What do you think he meant? I believe this verse could be interpreted that through John, God is talking about people with low self-esteem who need to be lifted up, just as every mountain of pride needs to be brought low. So let's say an illiterate man is in the market where he hears of a literacy class that's beginning in which he can learn to read his trade language in just four months. Two hours a day in the evening after work, five days a week for four months and the life of this man can be completely changed. And what can this man do after that? He can come home and gather his family around him and begin to read to them, 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' Some people will argue it is best for people to hear the word of God in their mother tongue. Yes, that's true. So as this man has learned to **read** in his trade language, he can then **translate** the word orally into his mother tongue. Then using his mother tongue, this man begins to lead his family in a discussion of the passage he just read to them in their trade language. This father's esteem in the eyes of his



wife and children and their community just went through the roof. This man has learned to read and has a new life.

Normally a class will have 15–20 students. One class in Rwanda recently had 38 students! The Kenya Rwandan head teacher who had gone through our TTW, and who knows the culture well, then selected the oldest adult student (over 60) to maintain **order and focus** in such a large class. It worked as the culture stipulates respect for elders. Instead of diminishing, the class grew from 38 students to 43 students (all adults) and is presently going into its last primer (work book) with 40 of the students already beginning to read! Hallelujah. **But there is more.** Nine of the students were non-believers, and seven of those nine have now come to faith in Christ.

So just a little more on what literacy evangelism looks like. This is a picture of **literate national believers who have been disciplined** and who want to serve the Lord by going through a TTW and teaching literacy classes to **those who may be of different ethnic groups but speak the same trade language.** Every day for two hours, five days a week, for four months the literacy students from the near

neighbor tribe(s) go to class, and are face to face and eye to eye with their teacher who is teaching them one of life's most important foundational skills. And what is happening? A bonding and the development of a relationship is what is taking place which can lead to salvation and discipleship. For indeed as students begin to read, they inevitably will have their Christian teacher to thank who took the time to love their neighbors as themselves. It is this simple reproducible methodology, and the opportunity for relational evangelism, that makes this methodology so compelling, attractive and successful. Ask Pricilla.

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I hope my advocating the use of trade languages does not put anyone off, but on the contrary, reveals how the medium of trade languages in literacy training can help **facilitate a faster MOVEMENT toward the completion of the Great Commission.** After all, the New Testament was originally written in a trade language. Perhaps there is an urgency in God. ❏

