

# Objections and Benefits of an Oral Strategy for Bible study and Teaching

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After participating in over forty orality/storytelling workshops in the last few years, I have become accustomed to a general skittishness that many people have concerning Bible story telling. There was a time when a church actually called a special meeting of the elder board to discuss at length whether they would allow our story seminar to take place on their property. They came up with seven questions about Simply the Story that we had to answer in detail before they would allow the seminar to take place. Since we consistently encounter objections to oral strategies, it would be helpful to address some of the main concerns that are voiced and balance those concerns with the major benefits.

## Concerns about Storytelling

1. *Misuse of Stories:* There is a modern trend in more liberal churches to substitute stories for solid

authoritative teaching. Many fear that when Bible stories are featured, the listener will come away with a nice Aesop Fable type moral, but will miss the true meaning of the passage. Thus in more conservative churches, there is a concern that in our postmodern age, absolute and objective truth will somehow be reduced to subjectivism and relativism, if not mere moralism, if narrative sections and stories are emphasized.

2. *Undermines Rigorous Bible Study:* An inordinate stress on stories will undermine the inductive study of the Word of God. There is concern that featuring Bible stories in an oral fashion will somehow make people lazy when it comes to diligent study of the more doctrinal parts of the Bible. An accompanying assumption is that storytelling is great for children, but adults and scholars need to study more solid and meatier sections.

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3. *Loss of Control*: Unpacking a story using questions, dialogue and discussion can open the door to ideas that may be at variance to the true meaning of the passage. Without someone to bring more authoritative control over the Biblical content, you could open the door to spurious teaching.

4. *Discourages Literacy*: If you affirm an oral approach too much, then people will not be inclined to improve their literacy. A person who relies on an audio player to receive the sacred Word, may not make the effort to learn how to read the text.

5. *Not for Large Groups*: Story telling is designed for smaller groups and is not effective in larger groups. The idea of having a large group repeat a story or asking questions on a Sunday morning is unwieldy and could be counter productive.

6. *Neglecting the Non-Narrative Genres of Scripture*: What about the epistles? An oral approach may work with narrative genre, but epistolary, prophetic and poetic sections need a propositional approach.

7. *Misses Authors Intended Meaning*: If you tell an individual story, you can miss the authors intended meaning, which is discerned by a careful study of the entire book. To get a proper interpretation one must have a good grasp of the context of the story, why the narrative is included at that point and just what the author has in mind by placing it there.

8. *Orality is a Passing Fad*: The current emphasis on story telling is missiologically fashionable at the present moment, but will not last.

9. *The Telephone Game Effect*: When you pass down a story orally, won't you dilute or even distort the story itself by multiple tellings?

## Benefits of Storytelling

The above nine concerns about orality will be addressed as the benefits of story telling are enumerated. After those nine are treated, more benefits will be presented.

1. *Finding Deep Truths Through Questions*: Deep truths are accessible to not just a chosen few with academic advantages, but can be mined together at a deep level as a group of believers directed by the Holy Spirit discuss and interact over a Bible story. We have found that by asking insightful observational and applicational questions of the story, audiences are actually able to discover meaty truths that may not be apparent on the surface. There is actually a way to do inductive Bible study, but in an oral style, so that important interpretations and applications arise directly from the Bible story itself. Not only Jesus, but also Socrates in the time-honored Socratic method, knew and used questions as a key to effective teaching.

2. *Develops Critical Thinking Capacity*: An oral learner can still be taught principles of inductive Bible study, but in an oral style. Critical thinking is valued in Western higher education, but is usually thought to occur through reading and analysis of texts. An oral discussion of the interpretation and application of stories in real time with a group, face-to-face, develops new analytic skills. Participants gain the ability to think "on one's feet" as they work through the story. This ability to dig into stories pays benefits when the person increases their reading ability and is able to study other genres of Scripture like poetry, prophesy and the epistles.

3. *Andragogy (Adult Learning)*: For the majority of Christian history, pedagogy has held sway. Pedagogy literally means "teaching children" with the main stress placed on the teacher who exercises control over the flow of information to often passive listeners. Information is often inculcated into the student by rote in a kind of indoctrination process. In andragogy you honor the life experience and spiritual background of the adult learner by allowing opportunities for dialogue and discussion through questions. The role of the storyteller is that of a facilitator who monitors the discussion and ensures that the group stays on track biblically. The leader stipulates that one must stay within the story at hand, which limits extraneous information from outside the story and insures that the mean-

ing of the story arises from the text itself. The storyteller/teacher does exercise a level of control over the group and the discussion, but in such a way that discovery-learning can take place as the story is discussed at both a cognitive and the affective level. The stress is on active learning rather than the passive absorption of facts from an expert. The group leader must do all the necessary background study of the story being treated, but be careful not to tell those treasures directly to the students. Instead, the facilitator's job is to allow the students to discover the treasures for themselves, which acts as a powerful aid to memory.

4. *Improves Literacy:* Our experience is that when an oral person becomes excited about Bible narratives, they often show a hunger for more stories. At that point they realize that literacy is a means to gain access to more of God's Word and their interest in reading and education is heightened.

5. *Effective in Large Groups:* There are ways to have the whole congregation repeat the story (usually in pairs), followed by questions addressed to the entire congregation. Individuals then respond verbally to the questions right from where they sit. In much larger groups, wireless microphones can sometimes be brought right to the person who answers. In other settings it may be more advisable for the storyteller to ask the questions, pause for the congregation to think, and then answer the question himself in a more rhetorical manner. In either case, the goal is to get the audience participating in the story itself so that they walk out the door knowing both the meaning of the story but also having confidence to retell it. The operative principle is "Don't teach anything that is not immediately reproducible."

6. *Other Scripture Genres Can be Oralized:* There are "narrative like" sections even in poetical and epistolary *genre* of the Bible. In our training we give examples from the epistles, like James 1:22-25 as well as Psalms 1 and 23. These and other sections lend themselves to an oral treatment due to their graphic images and underlying

story line. The key is to honor the genre and treat it accordingly. If an epistolary section is heavy with propositional doctrine, then it should be treated in a more propositional manner. The Major and Minor Prophets are full of images, parables, acted out signs and short story lines that can be orally told and dramatized. The same is true of certain parts of Wisdom literature as well. These propositional and poetical portions make up 25% of the Bible with the remaining 75% dedicated to the narrative genre.

7. *Sensitivity to the Context:* Story training helps the student be sensitive to the surrounding context. Most every story needs an introduction in which the storyteller gives relevant background information, or summary reference to the back-story that precedes it. During the introduction you can treat contextual issues, hard terms, cultural insights and even aspects of the authors intended meaning. By telling stories in chronological order throughout a book like the Gospel of Mark, you will more clearly see how the stories fit together and with it the underlying message that the author is seeking to communicate.

8. *Appreciation for the Storytelling Tradition in All Societies and in Christian History:* Every society and people group has their stories, legends, creation myths and bards. True, story is being rediscovered in the secular world due to the postmodern shift. But this resurgence of story in the secular world should not color the valid Biblical emphasis on narrative, nor be used to label orality as the "latest-greatest" fad in missiology. The storytelling art has enjoyed a long history in the annals of history. There is a vast corpus of qualitative research and extensive bibliographies that have been assembled to buttress the validity of oral strategies even in academic circles. It is true that the term "orality" is fairly recent. Walter Ong coined the term in his classic book, *Orality and Literacy* in the year 1982.<sup>1</sup> The contemporary orality movement has gained momentum especially in the last twenty years and will no doubt continue to flourish as our knowledge of oral learners increases.

9. *Reliable Generational Reproducibility*: People play the telephone game by whispering a phrase to one another around a circle. The last person is then asked to repeat the phrase, at which point everyone laughs as they see how much it was altered. This game is often cited when concerns about the transmission of stories is brought up. The flaw in the comparison, however, is that oral societies do not pass on their stories by whispering to one another. As group cultures, they all hear the story corporately and because it is a sacred story they seek to maintain the integrity of the story. In fact, in primary oral cultures, the very history, identity and heritage of the people group depends on knowing how to transmit stories faithfully from generation to generation. Also there is a self-correcting dynamic in any group that values a sacred story. This is illustrated in the current phenomenon of *Wikipedia*, on the Internet. The community corrects the wiki post; if someone sees information that is wrong or incomplete the public nature of the content allows public correction.

Having addressed some of the chief concerns about story telling, we can move on to even more benefits:

10. *The Jesus Model*: Jesus was the consummate oral storyteller of all history. It is said at one point, “All these things Jesus spoke to the multitudes in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable” (Math. 13:34). He used stories and parables with both the common people, but also with the most highly educated scribes and Pharisees. Jesus was particularly adept at using questions. He was asked a number of questions but most often chose to answer them obliquely by using a parable, a story, another question or simply not answer the question at all. The benefit of using stories and unpacking them with dialogue and discussion through questions serves as a reminder that you are using a proven method that the master teacher used extensively.

11. *Honoring the Nature of the Bible*: The majority of the Bible is in a story form with 15% dedicated to poetry and the remaining 10% to

more doctrinal material. God decided to present the bulk of his revelation through story knowing that through the ages most cultures would resonate and identify with the embedded truth contained in the stories that make up the sacred Word. A believer who knows the key stories and characters of the Scriptures is able to trace the redemptive message from the beginning to end as well as place the other writings and genres within that historic framework.

12. *Holistic Impact*: No doubt all Christians who teach God’s word are hoping for broad transformational change in their target audience. Yet the teaching/preaching that is done on the field today usually ends up with a more narrow cognitive impact. We certainly want to influence the way people think and believe since “renewing the mind” (Rom. 12:3) is always a valid and necessary goal in biblical teaching. But changing ones religious beliefs or even outward behavior does not mean that you have affected the core worldviews of the person. Messages on the field are for the most part presented in a propositional, sequential and logical manner as one might hear in the west. Such messages are respectfully listened to, but the question remains, “How deep do they reach into the core of the person?” Stories have the potential of affecting the listener not only in a cognitive way but also emotionally and even at a core/gut level in the Hebraic sense (Gen. 43:30). Seeing oral learners deeply identifying with characters and responding holistically is one reason why educators are taking a renewed look at the ancient art of oral story telling.

13. *Internalization and Ownership of Scriptural Truth*: When a story is learned and retold repeatedly, the storyteller is able to absorb and gain personal ownership of the story. The story itself as it is held in the head and heart serves as a kind of “oral outline” of the passage, so that notes are no longer necessary. That means that the story teller is ready to use stories or parts of stories at a moments notice for evangelism, counseling, discipleship, leadership training, preaching, teaching, etc. Over

time a storyteller can accumulate large numbers of stories in his personal database and in this way store up a wealth of truth to draw upon.

14. *Bible Memory*: A common goal in most all discipleship programs is to have people memorize scripture. Most often individual verses are learned by rote with care given to quoting it verbatim and giving the correct verse reference. All of us have benefited by such a practice, yet most all would give testimony concerning how difficult it is to put such verses into long term memory. Scores of verses faithfully memorized are eventually lost unless they are diligently reviewed for long periods. What is amazing about learning and absorbing stories is that many more verses can be retained in a shorter time. If you absorb thirty stories of ten verses each, you end up learning three hundred verses. As a pastor I would love for my people to be able to retell three hundred verses of sacred text. There also comes a point with multiple retellings that certain stories ends up needing no review at all.

15. *Generational Involvement*: In most every context I have participated in, be it a church, camp or conference, there comes a time when the adults are separated from the children. With a story approach you can actually keep the adults and children together as you share the Word. Once a couple who were home schooling their 12 and 13 year old asked if their children could participate in our five day training course. At the end of the week, these two young people became two of our best storytellers. At the lower ages you may need to separate them out, but you can still tell children the same stories that the adults experience. That way parents and their children can discuss the same stories together after the service.

16. *Family Devotions*: The father of the two children in the above illustration was thrilled to find an approach to family devotions that everyone in the family could contribute to and actually lead. As a father with four children, I used to read an age appropriate devotional to my family. If I had it to do over again, I would train my children to lead

an entire story session. In this way I could assign relevant stories to each family member so that everyone could take part.

17. *Immediate Feedback*: When a typical message is finished in a church context the speaker has no idea of how the people processed or understood the material. The nature of story telling means that as you unpack the story and ask open-ended questions you get immediate feedback. You can promptly tell whether the group is tracking with the story or is confused. With their relational and high group culture, the Thai appreciate the chance for such group participation and interaction. Be aware, however, that it may take a while for people to feel safe enough to share, especially if the only style they have had in the past is a lecture style. One needs an oral skill set to handle a group in this way and it may seem “messy” at times, yet adult learners appreciate and respond best when they sense their opinion is heard and valued.

18. *Equal Playing Field*: I once put on a seminar in the North East of Thailand and placed a pastor and housewife in the same group. The pastor was a strong leader and powerful speaker but the housewife was not a leader and had no significant role in the church. However, after a few story sessions, the pastor took me aside and asked, “What has gotten into that woman? She is asking questions that even I can’t answer.” In Thailand, usually an enlightened expert will arise within a group and culturally the Thai will always differ to the one with this “special knowledge”. The nature of a story group, however, means that the emphasis is on the story itself. You end up with a “level playing field” in which the novice along with the seasoned Bible student can contribute equally to the discussion.

19. *Improves Communication Skills*: What people fear most are not snakes or sharks, but having to give a speech in front of their peers. In story telling you are not tied to a podium or notes, but are free to express yourself by kinetic movements, gestures, voice inflection and facial expressions. We have seen very shy people blossom when they

realize that they can indeed tell a story in an effective way. Bible schools would especially benefit by including a section on the dynamics of story telling as a core part of the curriculum.

20. *Master the Minimum:* This was a basic point that Dr. Howard Hendricks often drove home to his students. Seek to simplify your communication to an essential minimum and then reinforce this core so that your listener gains a level of mastery over the subject. The fundamentals of effective story telling can be expressed in just a few basic steps. Mastering those steps will take much practice and many retellings of various stories. The preparation phase of story telling and forming of insightful questions is more involved, but this phase can also be reduced to a few basic steps.

21. *Interdenominational:* Recently I was asked my opinion of the topic that an American speaker coming to Thailand had chosen to speak on. I vetoed the topic because I knew that it would only breed controversy among the diverse group that this speaker planned to address. I have never found that to be true in any of the many story workshops that I have been involved in. When groups are restricted to dealing with the story at hand, then everyone can stay on the same page and dig together equally. Certainly there are lively discussions and even disagreements within groups as the scriptures are unpacked, but keeping the focus on life and blood situations that are mankind's common experience tends to keep the group focused on the essentials rather than peripheral matters.

22. *Intercultural/Cross-Cultural:* Because they are about human experience, stories are applicable to every culture. There is a saying, "Humans differ widely, but not wildly". There are universal human experiences in Bible stories that apply to all humans. One should strive to understand your target group's language and worldview as best as you can. However, stories in the Bible are actually very supra-cultural and speak powerfully into every worldview and felt need. I am constantly amazed at how a story, which someone designates as being

for discipleship, actually ends up being used to lead people to Christ. I have heard hundreds of messages that were only suitable or even understandable to the specific group they were aimed at. Story training, on the other hand, has a commonality that appeals to very diverse groups. Once we held training for eighty participants on the border with Laos, which had representatives from twenty-three churches. Although the background of the people and even languages spoken were quite diverse; they were able to process the stories together in an effective manner.

### Filling Your Heart Pocket

This paper started with specific concerns that hamper people's involvement in oral strategies. Although various objections are voiced, I have sensed that there is an underlying reason why people fail to embrace Bible story telling in an enthusiastic way. For one thing, they have invested a great deal of time, money and education in highly literate approaches. Often the bulk of their training and experience in communication has stressed a propositional, analytical and logical paradigm. So strong is this literate conditioning, that the majority of Christians I meet are unable to tell me even one Bible story in an accurate way (and there are around 1000 stories in the Bible). Many are able to give the gist of some Bible stories, but our western literate training does not put a premium on absorbing and retaining Bible stories and then telling them in our own words while maintaining content accuracy. If given a clear assignment and time to prepare a content accurate story, then most all would be able to comply. However, my concern is not what they can read to me from the Bible or explain to me from their notes, but what do they end up having in their "heart pocket" at that moment. What have they have internalized so as to have the confidence and competency to, like Paul, be "ready, in season and out of season"?

I can only speak for myself, but it was a sobering and embarrassing moment for me when I realized that my heart pocket was bereft of even

one accurate Bible story. I had taught in a highly propositional and western manner in four Thai Bible schools during my twenty plus years in Thailand. I had even used a very analytical and literate method with the semi-literate leprosy believers that I mentored during my church planting days. My students did benefit from this propositional approach and I will always affirm the need to train disciples in literacy and in an inductive study of God's word. However, a kind of epiphany occurred when I finally accepted the fact that my target audience was at their core preferred oral learners and sought to match my teaching style to their oral learning style. The result was a major paradigm shift in my view of both teaching and learning. The response by the Thai to this change was both compelling and immediate. The benefits listed above are just a part of the reason why myself along with many others are finding value in oral strategies.

## Hammers and Tweezers

A good carpenter does not arrive at the job site with only a hammer in his hand. I arrived in Thailand fresh out of seminary with a number of tools, but the main one was a literate/western hammer that I used in all my preaching, seminary teaching, and local church training. My oral/story communication skill, however, was the size of a tweezers. I noticed that my fellow cross-cultural Christian workers were carrying their tweezers as well, since they had been trained in a manner similar to myself. I still carry my hammer of course, and continue to pass the same hammer along to the Thai so they will know how to wield a propositional tool for the expository messages they give. But when treating the narrative portions that make up three-fourths of the Bible, I pack an oral tool and want to make sure the Thai own one as well.

With hammer in hand, I used to make sure people mastered certain *subjects and topics*. Now I see my calling is to teach not just content, but teach *people*, and oral people at that. To teach these people we need: 1) a variety of tools in our communication belt; 2) the knowledge of what tool to use for what type of learner; 3) skill plus diligence

in using those skills. The communicator who possesses such a tool chest of approaches will be well prepared when called upon to teach "the whole counsel of God".

## Endnotes

1. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982).