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DISCIPLE MAKING

Using Scripture to Disciple Believers in Oral Cultures

GRANT LOVEJOY | OCTOBER 3 2018

A quarter of the people groups served by IMB missionaries do not have any of the Bible in their primary language, which is a problem that needs to be addressed. But even for those who do, there are many peoples around the world who either do not read to learn or cannot read at all. As missionaries share the gospel, then, they must address the question of how to disciple new believers



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part of the Christian life. Passages like [Joshua 1:8](#), Psalm 119, and [John 8:31–32](#) illustrate that Scripture is invaluable in shaping the believer’s life—it is indispensable to discipleship. Jesus taught his disciples to abide in his word and obey his teachings.

“There are many
wonderful ways for people
to come to know the
Scriptures and align
themselves with it even if
they don’t have a Bible to
read or can’t read it for
themselves.”

For believers who do not read or have a Bible in their language, the key is to help them access the teachings of Scripture through other means. Nonreaders benefit greatly from having access to audio recordings of the Bible, for example. Sometimes believers without a Bible in their primary language can read or listen to a Bible in a second language they know well. There are many effective ways for people to come to know the Scriptures and align themselves with it even if they



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Done in pairs, small groups, or as a congregation, committing Scripture to memory can be a wonderful shared experience. Participants take turns repeating a Scripture passage in parts and in whole until they can repeat it from memory. With enough practice, individuals can learn to quote a verse or more of Scripture. Oral cultures often enjoy reciting Scripture as a group.

Learning Bible Stories

Another way to incorporate sizable chunks of Scripture into discipleship is by learning Bible stories. Many people find they can learn a Bible story of ten to twelve verses surprisingly quickly. Stories are easily remembered and an excellent discipleship tool with oral peoples. When disciples have audio or video of the Bible stories on their phone, they can review the story whenever they choose. The recording reinforces an accurate recall of the details, and it enables meditation on Scripture—a way that nonreaders study the Bible. Discussing stories with others helps them internalize Scripture and reflect on it.

An IMB missionary spent a year mastering one Bible story per week. At the end of the year, she had fifty-two additional Bible stories that she could tell accurately and in detail. They were available in her mind for God to use in shaping her identity, her beliefs, and her behavior. She also told them frequently as she disciplined others and encouraged them to master the stories, too.

Disciples can identify what each Bible story reveals about God and what God wants them to do in obedience to his Word. The Holy Spirit often leads them to a



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Discipling Others by Example

In one particular African people group, where thousands of people are being disciplined, reading comprehension is generally low. Many Christian leaders are nonreaders, but they know the Bible and are effective in discipling people like themselves. These leaders have memorized entire books of the Bible and can accurately tell dozens of individual Bible stories from Genesis to Revelation.

“Making disciples is a crucial function of the church and central to the global missionary task. Discipleship does not require printed materials or even the ability to read—it simply requires access to the Bible.”

They learned to tell stories by listening repeatedly to audio recordings of carefully prepared Bible stories, first on radio and then on handheld players.



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the Scriptures. They live out the Christian life, and their example is a powerful discipleship influence.

With people who like to learn but not to read, discipleship should follow the example of Jesus, who spent a lot of time with his disciples in a wide variety of situations. He demonstrated a lifestyle that pleased God. He taught the disciples in a more formal sense, but most of his interactions with them took place while he was ministering to other people.

Frequently his teaching method was to answer their questions about something that he had done. They often wanted to know how (“Lord, teach us to pray”) or why (“Why could we not drive out this evil spirit?”). Discipleship should be much more like an apprenticeship than a classroom course. Setting an example worthy of imitation is perhaps the most powerful aspect of discipling others.

Making disciples is a crucial function of the church and central to the global missionary task. Discipleship does not require printed materials or even the ability to read—it simply requires access to the Bible. We can pass down stories and teach believers the Scriptures through a variety of ways. Most importantly, we can remember that discipleship takes place in relationship with Christ and with other Christians in the context of a healthy church.

Grant Lovejoy is director of orality strategies for the International Mission Board. He has taught preaching, biblical interpretation, and Bible storytelling, and he has

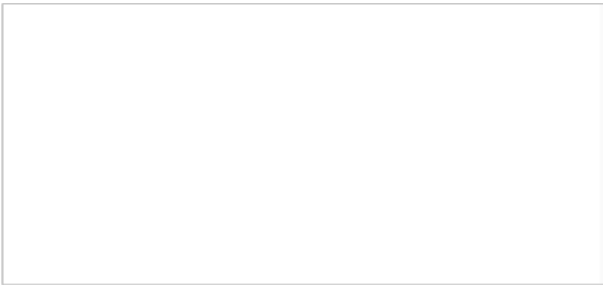


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