

# The Oral Story Bible: A Breakthrough Strategy in Oral Scripture Translation

## I. Introduction

I believe we stand at a unique moment in history! We can look back at the progress of the Gospel and see that the Lord has blessed. At the same time, we're burdened and challenged by the enormous task facing the global Church today. We're reminded of the task that remains among thousands of Unreached People Groups speaking languages with no translated Scripture. Almost half the world lives with a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim faith. And, everywhere there is a need for deeper discipleship. Recognition of these critical needs compels us to focus our prayer and ministry as never before. The Great Commission can seem overwhelming. But, the Church is beginning to work together and new creative strategies are opening some of the greatest opportunities in history.

The purpose of this paper is to draw our attention to one very measurable need. Historical literacy was a very protected and special privilege reserved solely for the elite -- usually the leaders of government, commerce, military and religion. For several millennia, leaders often counted on this privilege to control the masses who they ruled. If you're like me, we cherish our education and literacy. And we certainly should cherish education and literacy after all the effort most of us have invested. However, we often forget that the majority of the unreached people of our world are primarily oral learners and they learn much differently than we do. It's uncomfortable for us to change our methods of ministry, but we must be willing to face this challenge with creativity and God's heart of compassion for the lost.

## II. The Remaining Task

Two thousand years ago, Jesus entrusted His followers with a special commission - to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. We are told repeatedly throughout Scripture of God's heart for every language, tribe and people group to hear the Good News. We are commanded to go and tell everyone the Gospel and disciple those who choose to follow Christ.

There is much discussion regarding the depth of our Gospel presentations and our discipleship activities. But, the breadth seems clearly measurable. Every people group, tribe, and language should have the Gospel message. Yet, in the 21st century, there are still many groups where the Gospel has not penetrated. Research shows us there are more than 6,000 Unreached People Groups and half of them are not yet engaged by workers.

Today, one-third of the earth's people still await the first verse of Scripture in their own language and hundreds of languages have just a few chapters available to them. Without translated Scripture, it is unlikely you will find any Gospel message present. Often, there are no believers and no indigenous multiplying churches -- because how do you evangelize and disciple without God's Word? It seems there should be a minimal level of effort in every language, tribe and people group. Perhaps giving them access to God's Word in their own language and in their own learning style could be the first step of taking the Gospel to every people group.

### III. A Challenge for the Global Church

It seems likely the initial stage of engaging an unreached people group begins with providing the first Scripture in their language. I'm not a Bible translator, but I've served in ministry roles for the past 28 years where I've been blessed to work with hundreds of translators across the globe. I think we could all agree that linguists and Bible translators are uniquely called and gifted. They have a special gifting to understand and engineer language. All of us who have a Bible today owe a great debt of gratitude to translators who sacrificed greatly to bring us access to God's Word. Because of their vision and sacrifice, the translation of Scripture has accelerated at an unprecedented pace in recent decades. However, most of the remaining languages are unwritten languages and so much work remains today despite such amazing progress.

In a world of specialization, it's easy for us to look to those who are called to be translators to own that task for the whole world. However, I believe that Scripture access could be the most important step in world evangelization and it's a burden that all believers should carry together. Research shows us that there are 2,251 language groups with a population of 350 million people who have just a few chapters of Scripture. There are an additional billion people who have no Old Testament Scriptures. These Old Testament passages are essential to building bridges of understanding about Jesus-- especially Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims.

### IV. The Dream for EVERY...

If more of us "owned" the task of Scripture access and worked together toward a break-through, what could happen? Could this be the first generation in history to ensure at least some of God's Word is available to every people group on the planet?

How can the Great Commission be completed if we have failed in even beginning the work in thousands of languages and people groups? We must commit ourselves to starting the Great Commission effort in every group! With that dream and vision, a number of ministries began working together to see what could happen in our generation. We began with some core beliefs:

- A. All people groups need access to the Gospel.
- B. God's Word in their mother-tongue is always best.
- C. Cultural learning style should be honored.
- D. Strategic partnering is essential.
- E. National storying movements should be sought.

As often as possible, our goal is to see both oral Scripture and printed Scripture available to every group. The basis of this is Deuteronomy 31, 32 when God tells Moses at the end of his life that he should write down God's promises and laws and place them in the Ark to be read every seven years. Then He told them to teach the people God's Word through song so that His Word would be on the lips and ears of all the people. God even gave Moses and Joshua the song to teach His people.

## V. A Breakthrough Strategy

In partnership with Bible translators and church planters, we searched for a way to provide oral Scripture in a culturally appropriate way among unreached and unengaged people groups where no Gospel message existed. We think we have found that break-through strategy. This new strategy calls for pioneering teams of 2-3 people (often national teams or from nearby cultures) to engage an unreached group. Within 2-3 years, they are able to develop a set of Bible stories that span the Scriptures from Creation to the life of Christ, and then to the establishments of the early house churches in Acts.

The training is spread over a two year period so that these “rapid response teams” can be coached and mentored throughout their ministry project. During a two year period, the teams are brought together every 4-6 months for two week periods of training. The trainers provide a step-by-step process to:

1. Find a “person of peace”.
2. Immerse themselves in the culture.
3. Study the local belief system (worldview).
4. Locate a language helper and story teller.
5. Gather listening groups (story groups) to hear the stories and interact.

As the teams go deeper, they begin to tell Old Testament stories from Creation to the fall to Abraham, David, Elijah and Isaiah.

Soon, the teams will be weaving a theme of redemption from Creation to Jesus. The training helps the teams with word choices and basic translation issues and over time, they’ve been coached through developing a story set of 40 or more stories ranging from Creation to Christ and the establishment of early house churches in Acts.

Once the story set is developed, some of the stories are recorded so a translation consultant can check the stories for comprehension and biblical accuracy. After necessary changes have been made, the entire story set is recorded to “oral text” of Scripture. These recordings protect the stories until written Scripture can be provided. Audio recordings can also involve drama, music and other cultural methodologies. They can be broadly distributed as it fits the church planting strategy.

## VI. The Process

- A. New recruits are taught to craft the biblical stories so they are easily told orally.
- B. A local translator is recruited to help connect with the target language group.
- C. Small story groups are formed.
- D. Audio recordings of the stories are checked by an outside consultant; it is an “oral text”.
- E. After approval, the audio recordings are shared in homes, small groups, and even broadcast by radio digital players for broad sowing (radio in some locations).
- F. Story sets contain 40-60 Bible stories from Creation to Christ’s return (Old Testament, the Gospels and Acts).

## VII. Field Testimonies

“When western missionaries came to our country 100 years ago to share the gospel, they shared it in the same way they probably had learned it. Had they stopped to ask our local people how to share the most important message of all time, they would have learned that all of our most treasured information, (history, culture, heritage, values, beliefs, and even law) is contained in stories and songs. Normally, it was government propaganda that was in printed form so, unfortunately, the Bible was viewed as foreign propaganda.

As I sat in this Story training, I thought, finally, this is the way that the gospel should have always been shared in my country. This is God’s Word in its purest form, spoken or sung naturally and in the local language. Why not share the most treasured story of all time in a way that multiplies so quickly!! It takes people 7-8 years here with multiple methods to lead them to Christ, but with Bible stories, we’re seeing decisions and discipleship within the first two years! So simple, but so very effective...”

“After sitting in a week of Story training, I woke up early this morning from a disturbing dream that gripped my heart. In the dream, I was standing in the midst of fruit trees that were laden with ripe fruit, so ripe that it was falling from the trees right into our baskets. We were so excited with the harvest until I looked at my basket and saw all the fruit falling through and rotting on the ground. God spoke to my heart and said that our baskets are broken and He added that He had revealed to me this week how to get them mended and fixed.

For years, we’ve blamed our poor discipleship on the people, that they just don’t care enough to truly follow Jesus. What if we were wrong? What if we weren’t communicating to their heart and in a way that they can learn and reproduce it? We can’t afford to lose God’s Harvest! Please come back and help us fix our baskets by giving them God’s Word in the way that Africans learn best – by stories!!”

George – A West African Mission leader

“My husband and I are trainers for our organization here in East Asia. Besides that, we are also involved directly in working among an unreached people group. During the past couple of years, we’ve tried all the strategies that we knew to reach this group, but the task is nearly impossible with no Scripture, no JESUS Film, and no believers in this language. We attended the training with little confidence that this will work, but we’re desperate for a breakthrough. After the initial training, we returned to our unreached group and began using this Bible story strategy. We formed a small group and started translating our first stories with them. Can you imagine my surprise when we saw 15 people come to Christ? These were our very first converts. This happened during our first 2 months using this strategy. We’re now seeing the power of God’s Word shared in a cultural way in the local language and the outcome is incredible.”

Yun – East Asia

## VIII. Final Thoughts

In just the last 6-7 years, partner ministries such as ours have seen over 200 unreached people groups in more than 40 countries hear God’s Word in their own language and cultural learning style. Hundreds of small story groups have started and thousands of new believers are following Christ because they now have access to His Word!

We dream of the day when every language, tribe and people group will have access to the Gospel and we dream of it happening in our generation! Could we dream and plan and pray and work together so that every language hears in this decade? Until then, they’re still waiting...350 million people waiting for us to begin the Great Commission where they live...We think they’ve waited long enough!

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Rev. Ron Green is the director of StoryRunners, a missions organization dedicated to producing oral translations of the Scriptures. In the last five years, more than 200 Oral Story Bibles have been produced globally, many of them through the efforts of StoryRunners and their partners. Ron coordinated the OneStory partnership that pioneered the Oral Translation process and helped in the formation in the International Orality Network. He serves in the leadership of Campus Crusade for Christ, Int'l and for 15 years directed the Master Studio for the JESUS film project. Ron and his wife Carol make their home in Orlando, FL.