

# Scripture in an Accessible Form: The Most Common Avenue to Increased Scripture Engagement

by T. Wayne Dye

There are a large variety of factors that affect whether people will engage with the Scriptures. In a previous article (IJFM 26:2 pp. 89-98), I described and categorized these factors, listing each category as a “condition for Scripture engagement.”<sup>1</sup> I argued that any one of these conditions could by itself seriously hinder people from hearing or reading the Bible. The only effective way to encourage Scripture engagement is to change those hindering conditions. Without that, no amount of effort on the other conditions will result in many people using the Bible. The conditions, in their usual numbered order, are:

1. *Appropriate Language*: The Bible is in a language perceived to be appropriate for the Word of God.
2. *Acceptable Translation*: The translation style and presentation format is acceptable to readers and hearers.
3. *Accessible Forms*: People are able to read the Scriptures or hear them from others or by listening to electronic media.
4. *Background Knowledge*: Hearers and readers have sufficient knowledge about the background, original contexts, genres, and message of the Bible to understand what they hear or read.
5. *Availability*: Potential hearers and readers know of those Scripture portions and can obtain them.
6. *Spiritual Hunger*: There is a desire to know what is revealed in the Bible.
7. *Freedom to Commit*: Hearers and readers are not hindered by their social or political contexts or their beliefs from responding to what they hear.
8. *Partnership*: The community that will use the Scriptures is involved with producing and distributing them.

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Although these eight conditions are alike in that each one must be adequate for Scriptures to be used, the things that can be done to improve them differ considerably. *Appropriate Language* and *Freedom to Commit* are affected by the whole socio-cultural situation and are difficult to change. *Partnership* and *Acceptable Translation* are issues best handled from the beginning and throughout a Bible translation project. *Background Knowledge* and *Spiritual Hunger* are matters for Christian teaching. As for *Availability*, there are many ways to make the Bible available, but the details of these are so specific to each situation that systems can hardly be developed ahead of time.

*Accessible Forms* (condition 3) is the one condition that can be affected by approaches developed ahead of time and adapted widely. Putting biblical materials in accessible form is the most obvious way to promote them. It is not surprising, then, that making the Scriptures more accessible is the means most practitioners use to encourage Scripture engagement. Their work enables people to read the Bible or hear it told or see it acted out or see artwork that communicates its truth. Scripture engagement workers do a variety of things. If the Scriptures are written, they might teach people to read. If the Scriptures are promulgated in oral forms, they must usually teach people how to tell Bible stories. If Scripture is to be made available in electronic audio or video, then people must be trained in media.

The traditional way to increase accessibility has been to teach people to read. Today, missionaries recognize that billions of people who at least at one time could read a little do not in fact learn new information through reading. Most people who receive the Scriptures in their own language for the first time are not readers (International Orality Network 2005). The majority never learned to read. Of those who can or could, many prefer to learn orally.

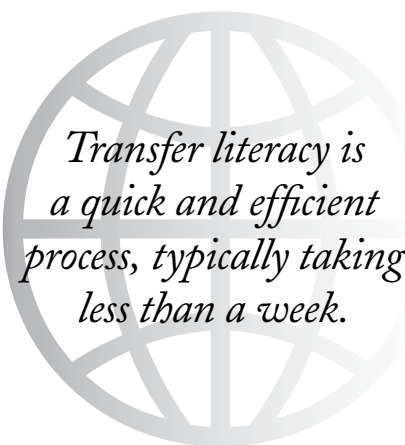
Reading programs still have a role in making Scripture accessible, but today the focus is on developing avenues for making the Bible available orally or visually. The last decade has seen many creative new approaches and products. We begin our classification of ways currently used to make the Bible accessible with what is rapidly becoming recognized as the most important form of Scripture teaching—telling Bible stories.

### *Storying (Oral Bible Story Telling)*

Oral Bible story telling in one form or another must be considered as a major way that people are empowered to engage with the Bible. Person-to-person story telling is the least-

developed medium for biblical teaching in most translation projects, but it may be the most useful (Brown 2004; Franklin 2005). Storying is a specialized form of telling Bible stories in a culturally relevant way to provide Bible background and teaching or to prepare people to understand the Good News. A story teller studies the traditional story telling forms and tries to fit the Bible stories into that narrative style as much as possible.

Storying could be used in many ways, depending on the culture: in markets, around the fires at night, in Sunday



Schools, in children's Bible clubs, Vacation Bible Schools, etc. This is especially valuable for non-literate pastors and/or non-literate congregations to share the basic content of the Bible. Usually the oral form is presented by one person to others, but there is a large supplemental role open to oral and visual media, such as CDs, DVDs, MP3s, etc. These media can be used by themselves or integrated as part of a storying approach.

Creating these stories could be a part of training new translators who need practice on simpler and more culturally relevant materials. Such translation must be done with care, however, so that the message communicated is true to the Bible. Storying can be a better alternative than ordinary Bible translation where bilingualism is high and another language is perceived to be more appropriate for written Scriptures.

### *Literacy*

No matter how central oral teaching methods are in Scripture engagement, there is also a need for at least some people to be able to read. Often it is best to teach all who are able and willing to learn. The Scripture engagement goal in literacy is that those who want to read the Scriptures can do so.

Where there are significant numbers of persons who are already literate in a dominant language, it is crucial to start with transfer literacy—teaching those who can read the official language to read the local language (Trudell 1995). Transfer literacy is a quick and efficient process, typically taking less than a week. It has important benefits. It enables church and community leaders to read the Scriptures first; they then introduce and teach the local language Bible as part of their normal role in the church. Typically some of these leaders also become the first local authors and some become the teachers of non-literate adults.

In most minority ethnic groups there are adults who are not literate but want to learn to read. They must not be kept from learning by lack of an adult literacy program, regardless of where they live or if they attend church (Wendell 1982). Basic literacy is a huge task in a large language group, since teaching each group of new literates can take several months. It is important to develop cooperative programs for this task involving all possible agencies: government, community, and church. Literacy for children in the local language is also necessary, lest reading end with the current generation.

Church-based literacy produces more readers of Scripture than community-based literacy. Missions can be very effective in facilitating this. In addition to benefiting the local church and community, literacy can build good relationships with local officials. Literacy in public schools is vital for making reading a normal part of community life, but it is extremely inefficient in producing vernacular

Bible readers. Children taught to read their local language in school are nearly always transitioned to reading in the Language of Wider Communication (LWC). Unless they become followers of Jesus and are in churches using local language, they nearly always continue to read only the LWC as adults.

Literacy needs to include writing if literates are to really use their skills. It must also include enough fluency training and practice that literates can read aloud well, since many people will depend completely on what is read to them. Reading Scripture to others was a first century practice; the apostle Paul told Timothy, "...devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture..." (I Tim. 4:13). A major goal of a church-based literacy program should be to produce fluent public readers who are able and willing to read the Bible expressively to others.

It is common for the translated Scriptures to be the main thing people want to read. To remain fluent readers, however, they need many pages of other materials. Many people who once knew how to read can no longer do so because they did not keep in practice. Therefore, for local language literacy to become sustainable, local language creative authors need to be inspired and encouraged. Distribution channels need to be created for these materials to be shared and sold; in some groups, churches can be that channel.

### *Local Performing and Visual Arts*

Many cultures are rich in traditional forms of communication such as drama, dance, storytelling, chants, poetry and music. These forms can be powerful and easily understood ways to tell God's story because they can be tailored to local culture (Fortunato et al 2006; Shrag 2007). Tapping into local artistic expressions to communicate biblical truths almost always results in increased effectiveness. Traditional forms can give credence to the message, create interest and

## *D*rama was key in convincing the Australian Aborigines on Elcho Island that God is for the Aborigine; He is not just a white man's God.

validate the acceptance of the new message. Local forms promote local involvement and fit the local economy.

Throughout history, the Bible has been included in worship in the form of music. It can also powerfully communicate the gospel, especially in those language groups that have poetic or musical ways of proclaiming what is true. Some music systems enable story telling through song. Others are limited to a few phrases; even these, however, may call to mind a whole Bible story. In some locations even introduced music has been effective in worship, but it is far more effective to use musical forms already accepted by the community.

Local forms do need to be evaluated to make sure they are appropriate for communicating the desired meaning. Some forms are associated with other religions or are erotic or communicate emotions inappropriate to a particular Christian message. In a few cases hearers strongly associate a certain local music style with traditional religion. Where that happens, and if a reasonable amount of teaching has not shaken the association, it is best to use other musical styles. In the Papua New Guinea village where I worked there is a type of instrumental music made with bamboo pipes that uses rich harmonics and has other features that I easily associate with Christian worship. Unfortunately, Bahinemos associate this music so strongly with worshipping ancestral spirits that even a generation later they are not willing to use it to worship God. Their traditional dance music, on the other hand, did not have this strong association nor was it erotic. That musical form was used for Christian worship songs. Traditional dances also continued for about thirty years.<sup>2</sup>

I found a different situation in Kenya. Lyre music was banned by many missions because it had been used in traditional religious activity. In one tribe, however, workers encouraged compositions for the lyre to worship God. These have had no negative associations and are attractive to listeners. From many situations like these, I conclude that only local believers can decide what musical styles and pieces to retain. Even after long residence, outsiders do not have adequate cultural intuition. Sometimes the determination depends on time; the first generation of believers cannot use a particular traditional form but later, after negative associations are gone, that form can be quite appropriate. Using local music is well worth the effort; it greatly enhances interest in the message and opens the way for adapting local linguistic and cultural forms for Christian teaching and worship.

Plays are an excellent way to communicate the message orally. Some cultures have special drama forms to communicate various truths. Drama can be used to communicate truth about medical problems, overcome key barriers to the gospel or even portray Bible stories. To use drama effectively, it is best to find local experts to teach and oversee this medium. Once drama is perfected with good response, teams could use this medium repeatedly. Drama was key in convincing the Australian Aborigines on Elcho Island that God is for the Aborigine; He is not just a white man's God. When they truly realized that, they quickly spread the message throughout the Outback.

Passion plays are powerful communication tools. For Easter one village in Ghana used the whole village as the setting for a passion play where everyone participated. Small groups can read a passage and dramatize it to reinforce learning. Some have used the New

Media Bible video set of Luke's Gospel as a basis for their own dramas. This is useful in children's meetings, conferences, and in other situations as well.

Local art and objects can be used as means of communicating biblical truths. Local artists can draw pictures using their own image systems to remind people of certain Scriptures. The Bible itself includes many visual symbols, including sheep, bread, water, the cross, and light. Objects from a story itself can be used to involve people in the message. Local forms can be more meaningful than foreign forms. Chronological charts can be helpful, especially for pastors and leaders. The better ones show key historical facts, Bible books and key Bible figures in their diagrams. They give some kind of overarching framework for Bible teachers to have in mind.

Pictures can be used as a basis for telling Bible Stories. A picture triggers the memory for the storyteller and reminds the listener of the story. This method has been used in Sunday Schools throughout the USA for many years. One problem with sending western pictures overseas is that they do have to be tested to see if they give the same meaning and have the right associations. It is much better if local artists are commissioned who know how to communicate the correct meaning. Their pictures can be scanned or photographed and made into posters and charts for teaching.

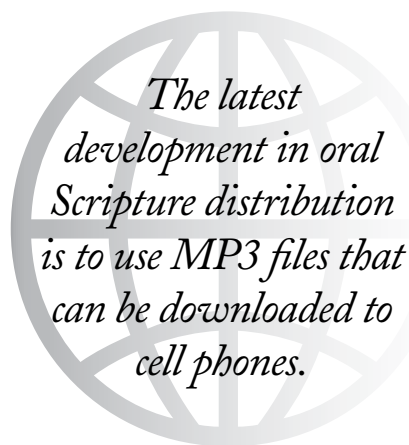
A Cameroonian artist painted the whole life of Christ picturing each person as an African in traditional Cameroonian dress. These pictures were produced as posters and slides. Cameroonian people interacted with these visuals more than with Western visuals of the same Bible stories. They are now available on the web and in some bookstores in Africa.<sup>3</sup> Such re-telling of Bible stories can be useful for Sunday Schools and witness. Locally created visuals help people understand the relevance of Scripture to their lives. However, historically

accurate visuals are also needed to provide background knowledge.

As with music, plays, poetry, pictures and other art forms need to be evaluated to see that they are appropriate for conveying the good news.

### *Audio Recordings*

Electronic audio devices are valuable media everywhere. Various portions of the Bible have been put into audio format since the 1930s, when Gospel Recordings (now Global Recordings Network) began working. Many missionaries are concluding that oral



societies need all translated Scripture in electronic audio format. A few translation programs are not having a book printed at all because no one in that society reads.

Battery, solar-powered and hand cranked players are available from recording ministries at a subsidized price for communities lacking access to electricity. People using these devices must be taught some maintenance techniques and when to take them in for repair, but this is a simple task compared with literacy or training them in drama. If audio devices are loaned out, there must be some cultural system of oversight, distribution and return. If MP3s are used, a means must be found to distribute them. If cassette tapes are used, they must be priced high enough that people do not buy them to tape their own popular songs over the ministry cassettes.

Electronic audio formats vary widely. Where groups of people are already hungry to understand the Bible, straight Scripture passages with a single voice are often effective. Where interest is lower, using many voices and mixing in music generally works better. In some places people not previously interested in hearing the Bible have become regular listeners of Bible studies or of dramas about people like themselves who found answers for their lives in the Bible.

Radio is a valuable strategy where most people have access to a radio and listen to it several hours a day. Preparing radio messages is hard work and often requires full-time specialists. However, in many cultures it is well worth the effort. The language has to be spoken by enough people that local radio stations see programs in it as a valid use of their air time. Producing regular radio programs may require a significant amount of money for wages and equipment, but it can be money well spent. Workers in some West African language groups are using Scripture-based radio dramas successfully. The program opens with a short drama that demonstrates a particular problem. One of the characters then notes how that problem reminds them of a particular Bible passage that speaks to the issue (Petersen 2008). There are many creative ways in which radio can be employed, including Scripture-infused plays, dialogues, songs, stories and interviews.

### *Cell Phones*

The latest development in oral Scripture distribution is to use MP3 files on the internet that can be downloaded to cell phones. Cell phone usage continues to grow exponentially; already more than 60% of the world's people have cell phones. By December 2008 there were 800,000 more mobile phones than in December 2007, with the greatest rate of growth in less developed countries, according to the UN.<sup>4</sup>

Making MP3 files available for download is relatively cheap. It requires no

maintenance of receiving equipment. It requires no training for the user beyond what is already being provided in that society, and it allows a measure of anonymity. This method of distribution has so much potential that the Forum of Bible Agencies International has begun a project to put *all* of the translated Scriptures in the world online for downloading.<sup>5</sup>

### Videos

Being able to see as well as hear increases the intensity of communication. Making adequate use of videos requires more preparation, extra effort and equipment, but the results can be worth the effort. The JESUS film is a major production with major costs, but it is powerful in helping people see what Jesus did. Most people have difficulty visualizing and believing that Jesus actually lived on earth. In portraying how He lived, video often builds faith that Jesus is real. The JESUS film is most effective when integrated into face-to-face teaching (Steffen 1993). It is not the only effective video available, however. Many Bible stories and biographies of believers are available on DVD (VCD in some countries). That makes video an important tool for use by Scripture engagement practitioners. In each situation, they need to first determine which of these many video productions would be best for their audience.

Video is crucial for one type of translated product. There are at least 119 sign languages in the world, each needing its own translation. All of these depend on videos in the way that translations in other languages depend on books—for distribution and for an unchanging resource.

### Electronic media: A Word of Caution

The many forms and products in electronic media are a blessing for those encouraging Scripture engagement. They can do more than make Scriptures accessible (Condition 3). Media can help with perceptions of the appropriate lan-

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guage (Condition 1) by demonstrating that prestigious forms such as movies and radio broadcasts are part of the repertoire of the local language. Electronic media are tools for increasing understanding (Condition 4). Cell phone MP3s and radio broadcasts make the Bible easily available (Condition 5). Scriptures in electronic media may be attractive to those with little interest (Condition 6). This wide usefulness has led many organizations to focus on this aspect of Scripture engagement.

It would be easy to assume that some form of electronic media can overcome all the problems of Scripture engagement. That would be an unfortunate assumption. The reality is that media are effective to varying degrees and sometimes less effective than speaking face-to-face and other more humble methods. In some situations, the most serious hindrances to Scripture engagement (in our terminology the weakest conditions) are not helped at all by electronic media. In other places the media itself is so distractingly new or the production values are so culturally specific as to limit the communication value. No matter how many electronic tools at one's disposal, there is no substitute for analyzing each situation and carefully thinking through the issues.

Workers then need to choose which media to use and what to communicate through each. The most important consideration is neither the medium used nor the technical and artistic quality with which it is used. The choice of medium can make a difference, and better artistic quality enhances any communication. However, the most important quality is how relevant the message seems to be to the lives of its hearers. If a hearer (or reader or viewer) thinks the message can make an important difference in

his life, he will make an effort to listen, even if the quality is poor. Conversely, if he thinks it says nothing personally relevant, he will ignore even the best presented message. This principle of personal relevance is critical to communication.<sup>6</sup> The key question, therefore, is what aspects of the gospel or of biblical teaching will effectively impact those particular hearers?

In summary, printed books and/or oral storying are essential components of Bible translation efforts. Local music, visual and performing arts have proven effective in many places for promoting the use of local-language Scriptures. Because written Bibles are necessary as references as well as being valuable for daily use, literacy can be vital to Scripture engagement. Various forms of electronic media have an important role. This role is usually supplemental but sometimes electronic media are the main forms of distribution of Scripture. **IJFM**

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The phrase "Scripture engagement" is replacing the older term "Scripture use" in order to emphasize that it is not mere reading or hearing, but allowing Scripture to impact one's life.

<sup>2</sup>Eventually that music was replaced by modern Pacific Island church music, which is accompanied by guitars and has a much livelier style. Their traditional dances have

also been banned by the village, since the current principal purpose of such dances is to enable tourists to see young women wearing traditional topless garb.

<sup>3</sup>[www.jesusmafa.com](http://www.jesusmafa.com)

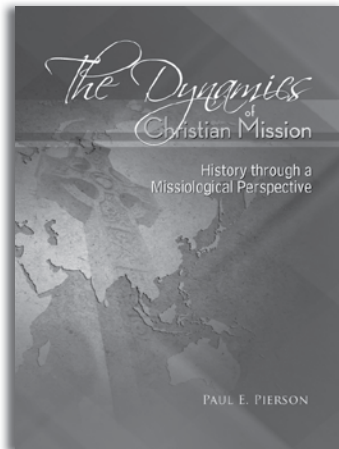
<sup>4</sup>[http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at\\_glance/KeyTelecom99.html](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at_glance/KeyTelecom99.html) (International Telecommunications Union is an arm of the United Nations.)

<sup>5</sup>For the current status of this project and to download Scriptures available to date, visit [www.forum-intl.net/find\\_a\\_bible](http://www.forum-intl.net/find_a_bible)

<sup>6</sup>My initial data for this was reported in 1980, in my dissertation, "The Bible Translation Strategy," especially in chapter 3. There have been many subsequent examples, including the highly successful West African radio dramas mentioned above. The underlying communication theory, Relevance Theory, was first introduced to Bible translators by Ernst-August Gutt in 1989.

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