





# INTRODUCTION

## First Century Secrets?

What could we possibly learn from ancient people who did not even have access to smartphones, the internet, pdf e-books—or even Bibles?

As it turns out, we have a lot to learn from our spiritual ancestors. They, after all, are the ones who first spread the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa, and they did so without all the text-based tools we consider indispensable today. They were unstoppable. Language barriers could not stop them. Ethnic, tribal, gender, religious, and class barriers could not stop them. Crucifixions, stoning, burning, and wild beasts could not stop them. They needed neither swords, nor spears, nor even Bibles, to spread their good news—so how did they do it?

## The Gospel First Spread as an Oral Tradition

In the first and second centuries, the gospel spread as an oral tradition. Bible Storying, Orality, Bible Storytelling—these are all different names for the relational, face-to-face, voice-to-voice, stories-and-questions way the gospel first spread, and is still spreading throughout much of the world today. It is the subject of this mini e-book, one of the fastest-growing movements in evangelism today, and a tool that can help you do what you do more effectively.

Part one of this mini e-book is an introduction to the topic of oral cultures, oral communication styles, and Bible Storying. Part two is a practical guide describing how to use Bible Storying to make disciples, and in part three you will learn how you can go deeper to experience, learn, and use practical Bible Storying as a tool to add life to all your kingdom endeavors.

We pray this will be useful to you as you spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Enjoy!

## **PART ONE**

# Stories & Questions

## The Space Between Us

When you want to share something as glorious as the gospel with someone who does not know what it means to accept Christ as their king, it can feel like there is a big chasm between you. That chasm can feel even bigger when you aim to be a witness for Christ in a population that is foreign to you—prisoners, or the homeless, the hungry, immigrants, drug addicts, or new friends you have made in another part of the world.

That distance we perceive between us can feel great at times, but none of us will ever be able to imagine the distance God—the Almighty Creator of the Universe—had to cross in becoming human to be with us, teach us, and save us from our sins. When God did cross that chasm by becoming incarnate in Jesus, there is a particular way he chose to teach. We would be impoverishing ourselves not to pay close attention to his example.

## Jesus & Oral Culture

Jesus almost never taught using text. He taught primarily by telling stories and asking questions. There was only one time when Jesus offered a text-based teaching. The story is related in Luke 4, 16-27. It takes place in the synagogue in his home town, Nazareth. In it, Jesus unrolled a scroll, read from the prophet Isaiah, implied he was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy, compared himself to Elijah and Elisha, then everybody tried to kill him. Even that was not really a text-based teaching, but prophetic theater. It was the story the moment told, and the meaning conveyed by its resonance with other stories told by Isaiah and about Elijah, Elisha, and God that gave the moment its meaning, and compelled people to tell that story for decades before Luke committed it to writing. Prophetic action, like stories, questions, parables, and proverbs are all features of oral culture.

Consider the Bible's stories about Jesus—The Woman at the Well, Jesus Calms the Storm, The Triumphal Entry, The Demon-Possessed Gerasene, Nicodemus, The Blind Beggar—all of them are stories that convey deeper meaning. They are sharable and reproducible, and through them people could learn a little, share a lot, and implement immediately. That is how the gospel spread long before it was written down, and it still works for us today.

Jesus' followers caught on right away, teaching the way Jesus taught, by telling stories and asking questions. It is remarkable when you think about it, that a handful of working class disciples with a crucified king could make their message known throughout the Roman Empire, even during decades when Rome was trying to stamp out the Jesus movement.

With its coins, statues, engravings, monuments, state religion, temples, commissioned poems, and oratory arts, Rome had the most sophisticated propaganda system in the history of the world, yet it could not stop the Jesus movement from spreading through the stories his followers told. Today, the Roman Empire is history, and the Body of Christ is two-billion people strong and growing.

The power of the Holy Spirit still works today through the same stories those disciples told, especially when we share them the way they did—relationally, face-to-face, talking and listening, speaking and acting. Bible Storying not only helps us do that, but it also solves a problem faced by every gospel-proclaiming effort in the world today.

## The Problem Every Gospel Proclaimer Must Solve

Two numbers sum it up: According to the International Orality Network, 80% all people are oral preference learners. That is, they learn better by listening and speaking than they do by print-based means.

Yet 90% of the world's Christian workers present the gospel using literate communication styles. Those numbers simply do not line up, but luckily the solution to our problem is not difficult to grasp.

## The Solution

Christians around the world are rediscovering the oral, relational, storytelling gospel-sharing methods of the early Church, and putting them to work in their contemporary context. There are many ways this is happening today, and Contextual Bible Storying is one them.

## What Exactly is “Contextual” Bible Storying?

In order to talk more specifically about different Bible storying approaches, academics have divided Bible Storying up in to different varieties—chronological, relational, topical, thematic, systematic, and contextual to name a few.

Contextual Bible Storying simply means that the storyteller provides the context for the story before telling it. As you can imagine, it is the same thing a Jesus-follower would have done when telling a Greek, Roman, Parthian, Mede, Cappadocian, African, Arab, Elamite, or Asian person about Jesus.

## Bible Storying & the Global South Today

The early Church is not the only place to turn to learn about spreading the gospel by oral means. We are learning a lot today by observing rapidly reproducing church planting and disciple making movements in the global south.

Parts of Africa, India, China, and Latin America are experiencing church growth that should capture the attention of every church planter in the Western world. Unsurprisingly, it is among oral-preference cultures where we see the church growing the fastest—a world that is a lot more like that of the first and second centuries than it is like ours.

## Communication Styles in Oral Cultures

In oral cultures, it is a lot more common to communicate through song, dance, drama, poetry, proverbs, parables, storytelling and other oral arts. Earlier we talked about how Jesus taught using

stories, questions, parables, proverbs, and prophetic theater. While our more modern means of communication are helpful, it is wise to look to Jesus to see God teaching us how to communicate today.

What makes oral communication styles so effective is that they are relational, participatory, action-oriented, communal, experiential, and engaging. We commonly witness these communication styles in the work of Living Water International. When a school in Africa thanks us, they do not point us to a text. They perform a skit, a poem, dance, song, or story. These are the ways Christianity spread throughout the world before the printing press, radio, television, and the internet, and they still work today.

Contextual Bible Storying is about communicating biblical truths that resonate with people in oral cultures in a way that is easy for people understand and share with others. We are blessed to live in an age in which we can embrace the gifts of this and every age, and harness them all to advance the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## The Gifts of Every Age

Our modern means of communication—print, podcast, photo, film, internet, radio—are effective. That is why we use them, but they lack the relationship-building capacity of face-to-face interaction. The Holy Spirit does something unique when we communicate with one another through stories and questions, shared face-to-face. Bible Storying is not meant to replace any method of sharing the gospel that is working, but, properly used, it can enhance any method of sharing the gospel, whether it is working or not.

## The Historical Scarcity of the Written Word

Many Western Christians today cannot even imagine a relationship with God without the aid of a Bible. Many find it surprising to consider that the printing press that made household Bibles in native tongues possible was invented only 25 generations ago. From the time of Jesus to the renaissance, the gospel spread through oral, and not written, means.

Some scholars estimate that in Jesus' day 90% of all people were nonreaders. Some say it may have been as few as 3% of people in Jesus' time who would have had access to the Scriptures and could have read them with comprehension. For the vast majority of history, and in many populations today, the gospel was and is communicated and experienced orally.

## The Great Commission

The Great Commission is Jesus' mandate to "go and make disciples of all nations" (or, for a more literal translation, all people groups).

Increasingly, through globalized business, immigration, church-to-church relationships, missionary activity, and short-term mission trips, more and more of us end up with an opportunity to share the gospel with people from different cultures. Hundreds of people groups around the world do not even have a Bible translated into their native tongue. Missionaries around the world and at home are finding that telling stories and asking questions remains an incomparably effective way to share the gospel. We are also finding that oral-preference learning is not at all confined to the developing world. From children's groups, to at-risk youth, prison ministry, or visiting the elderly, storytelling is an art everyone enjoys, and Bible Storying is an effective disciple-making skill in all nations.

## Why Does it Work?

For one, we are wired for stories. Stories are the way we make sense of our lives, and of the world. Every culture that has ever existed has developed stories as a primary feature of its culture. It is simply the way we are.

Bible stories are particularly well-suited to be related orally because that is the tradition within which they emerged. The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well had been told hundreds of times before the evangelist John committed it to paper, and those tellings all refined the story to be shared person-to-person.

Not only were these famous stories about Jesus shared, but they

were used to make disciples of countless followers of Jesus across political, linguistic, and cultural barriers. Why? Because the very nature of storytelling is relational. It starts the conversations within which we share our lives, build relationships, and bring one another closer to Christ. With just a little training and practice, we can spread the good news offered by Jesus in a way that is easy, replicable, and fun.

In part two of this e-book, we will take a closer look at exactly how Contextual Bible Storying is done, and some best practices that can get you to work telling stories, asking questions, and making disciples today.

## PART TWO

# Telling the Story

## Storytelling Talent Not Required

You do not need to be a good storyteller because we have great stories to tell. The pressure is off!

All the great New Testament stories that tell us about Jesus—The Woman at the Well, Jesus Calms the Storm, The Demon-Possessed Gerasene, Nicodemus, The Blind Beggar—are crafted for oral transmission. Tell them, and the Holy Spirit will do the rest. Those five stories alone, with the appropriate pre- and post-story dialog, can give a community or language group a simple, systematic narrative theology of the most important things they need to know to begin a relationship with the living God and become a reproducing follower of Jesus.

In this part we will go over how to go about telling one of our favorite Bible stories, The Woman at the Well.

## Storytelling Tips

- » Tell stories from beginning to end without interruption for commentary and background. Scripture's stories are carefully crafted. Discuss them, ask questions, but do not pause to explain or add to them while you tell them.
- » “Bookend” your stories by beginning with a phrase like, “This is the story from the Word of God...” and ending them with a phrase like, “And that is a story from God’s Word.” This signals to your listener when the Bible story begins and ends so they can distinguish the story from your discussion, questions, comments, and dialog.
- » Always follow up with questions and dialog. This is where learning happens, and how relationships are built.
- » Learn a little, practice a lot, implement immediately, and tell stories often. It is better to learn a little that you share

a lot than to know a lot that you keep to yourself.

- » Remember that the Holy Spirit is at work in your listener’s heart—there is no pressure on you.

## Pre-Story Dialog

As you introduce this story, you might ask your hearers to describe the physical symptoms of thirst. In water-scarce parts of the world, your discussion can bridge the concept of living water and physical water.

Set up the story with a few simple words to help your listener locate the story. A contextual set up for The Woman at the Well might be something as simple as, “This is a story that took place as Jesus led his disciples across Samaria from Jerusalem to Galilee in a time when Samaritans and Jews were enemies.”

Then tell the story, which goes like this...

## The Woman at the Well

*“This is the story from the Word of God...”*

*Jesus left the region of Judea to return to Galilee. Now, he had to go through Samaria, where Jacob’s well is located. Jesus, being tired from the journey, sat down by the well to rest. It was about noon, the disciples had gone into town to buy food, and a Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to the woman, “Will you give me a drink?”*

*The Samaritan woman said to him, “You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan and a woman. How can you ask me for a drink?” (The Jews do not associate or have anything to do with the Samaritans.)*

*Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*

*The woman said, “Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?”*

*Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks water from this well will be thirsty again,*

*but whoever drinks the water I give will never thirst again, ever. Indeed, the water I give him will become within him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”*

*The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty anymore and have to keep coming here to draw water.”*

*Jesus told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”*

*“I have no husband,” she replied.*

*Jesus said, “You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you are living with now is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”*

*“Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem,” the woman said.*

*Jesus declared, “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. For the time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”*

*The woman said, “I know that Messiah (called Christ) is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”*

*Then Jesus declared, “I who speak to you am he.”*

*About that time, his disciples returned from the town from buying food and were amazed and surprised to find Jesus talking with a woman. But no one asked, “What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”*

*Just then, the woman left her water pot and went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be Christ [the Messiah]?” The people came out of the town and made their way toward Jesus. Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony.*

*So when the Samaritans came to him, they begged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers.*

*The people said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of your testimony; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”*

*“And that’s the story from God’s Word.”*

(See John 4:3-42 NIV)

## Post-Story Dialogue

This story gives you an opportunity to talk to your hearers about ethnic and racial differences and how God views them versus how human beings view them. You can mention that in first-century Palestine, a Jewish person would never dare share a water container with a Samaritan because they saw them as half-breeds and outcasts, and they would not have anything to do with them. In regions of your nation or areas in the world where there is a lot of racism or tribal conflict or ethnic issues, this is a great point to elaborate on once you have told the story and started to make applications. In addition, you might want to provide some clarifying information about the relationships between men and women in first-century Palestine and how unusual it was for a man to have spoken to a woman in a public place and asked her for water.

Again, there is a valuable message in the fact that the woman left her water pot behind to go and tell of her encounter with Jesus. You can guide the discussion from physical water/physical life to “living water”/spiritual life, from physical thirst to spiritual thirst, and to which is ultimately more satisfying for our deepest need. You can talk about the woman’s background and her spiritual transformation and ask your hearers if they have experienced spiritual transformation, also.

## Sample Post-Story Questions:

1. From this story, what do we learn about the humanity of Jesus? What do we learn about his deity?
2. What do we learn about God’s perspective on different racial, ethnic, or tribal groups?

3. What was this woman's life like before she met Jesus?
4. Why was the woman coming to the well to draw water in the middle of the day?
5. What did Jesus mean when he said, "If you knew the gift of God..."?
6. What was Jesus seeking to communicate to the woman by using the words living water?
7. Do you observe a change of attitude in this woman through the course of her conversation with Jesus? If so, what is it?
8. Why were the disciples amazed and surprised when they returned from buying food and saw Jesus talking with this woman?
9. What do we learn from the fact that the woman left her water pot—when she had gone to the well specifically to get water—and went to her town to tell about her encounter with Jesus?
10. Does Jesus still offer this "living water" to people today?
11. What do we learn from this story about spiritual transformation?
12. Have you personally experienced the "living water" and spiritual transformation that this woman experienced? If not, would you like to?

### Learn a Little, Practice a Lot, Implement Immediately, Tell the Stories Often

Now it is time to practice your story. You do not need to memorize it word-for-word. Concentrate on knowing the big movements and important details of the story, and practice it with a friend, or a group. In Asia and Africa, we have seen even small children hear these stories once, then repeat them with remarkable accuracy. Sometimes it is at first a challenge for people from print-based cultures, but after just a few rounds of practice you will be telling stories easily and comfortably. With some practice, Bible Storying is something you can get good enough at to use in a day. Just one

story can start dozens of conversations about Jesus and the character of God revealed through him. With just a handful of stories—three to five—you will be equipped for a lifetime of sharing the gospel.

Lastly, this chapter concludes by acknowledging an irony that might be an elephant in the room—with this mini-ebook, we are using a written means to talk about oral storytelling tradition. This is not ideal. It should be obvious by now that Bible Storying is best learned and practiced orally in groups, which we will be the subject of part three.

## **PART THREE**

# Going Deeper

## The Bible Storying Workshop

Churches and individuals across the nation and around the world are using Contextual Bible Storying to strengthen their ministries. Once again, the gospel is spreading throughout the world through stories and questions. Bible Storying works with anyone anytime anywhere because it is a simple, relational, reproducible way to share your faith and make disciples.

In our work at Living Water International, Bible Storying is an indispensable part of our great commission efforts around the world. In many cases a single one-day training has led to new disciples, new disciple-makers, new church members, and new churches all over Africa, Asia, and Latin America. That is why we have made that same workshop available to you here in the United States. The results so far have been incredible.

## Practical Uses

Here are just a few practical ways people have incorporated Contextual Bible Storying into their ministry:

- » Pastors report that the Bible Storying Workshop empowers their congregation to share the gospel themselves, breaking their dependency on “religious authorities,” helping their congregation become the “kingdom of priests” God meant us to be.
- » Some churches have found the Bible Storying Workshop to be so helpful they have made it a required pre-requisite for their domestic or foreign church mission trips.
- » Churches and individuals alike testify that the Bible Storying Workshop has helped them share the gospel in business settings, among children in Sunday school, prison ministries, feeding ministries, among the elderly,

immigrants, addicts, and in foreign missions settings, as well as in ordinary day-to-day interactions with others.

## Workshop Content

This one-day workshop offers practical, proven principles for making disciples among oral preference learners. Topics include:

- » the scope of the problem
- » the nature of oral cultures
- » the need to understand oral learners
- » why and how oral strategies work
- » the power of simplicity
- » the power of reproducibility
- » the importance of multiplication
- » oral methods of personal evangelism
- » keys to effective disciple making
- » the value of using stories and questions
- » an overview of the Bible Storying movement

*To schedule a Bible Storying Workshop in your area contact Christy by email at [criffe@water.cc](mailto:criffe@water.cc) or by phone at (281) 207-7800.*

The Bible Storying Workshop is an experience that can change the life of your community. Get in touch for more information about scheduling yours today.

## Here is What People Are Saying About Bible Storying & the Orality Movement

*“The Bible Storying Workshop empowers people with the ability to share the gospel through stories. If you’re ready to equip and empower your people, I would encourage you to contact Living Water International and set up a Bible Storying Workshop, and together, we’ll change the world.”*

-Dave Walters, Associate Pastor, The Chapel, Fort Wayne, Indiana

*“You don’t need a lot of resources to share the gospel. You share the story, and from that, the Lord is able to do a lot. When you share a text, it looks like you keep it, but sharing stories orally brings about multiplication because other people take it away, and it is so easy for the people to go and share the story.”*

-Collins Halwindi, Community Mobilization Officer, LivingSocial, Zambia

*“The modern orality movement impacts global ministry on every level, whether one is aware of it or not. It influences every aspect of ministry: training, theological education, Bible curricula, Bible translation, evangelism, church planting, community development, business as mission, creation care, the arts, media, hermeneutics, and homiletics. Let us hope that global church leaders discover its contributions.”*

-Dr. Tom Steffen, Professor of Intercultural Studies, Biola University

*“The training in storying by Jerry Wiles was one of my best investments. This has enriched my personal growth. I know I will be able to go even deeper...The storying training by Jerry Wiles has sharpened me. I’m excited and grateful for his help.”*

-Elaine Bleakney, Sunday School teacher and follower of Christ for 55 years

*“As much as I read or learnt about oral tradition, I could not fully understand*

*it until I experienced it. I experienced it that weekend and was moved by it. Everyone at the training went away with a different perspective. Each of the ten attendees represented a different ministry in the city. Each of those attendants, ranging from 18 to 60 years old, began to dream about how they could use these ideas in their spheres of influence.”*

-Lauren Linz, Little Rock, Arkansas



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