

The A-B-C's of Missions: Preach, Hear and Believe
By David Hesselgrave

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him; for “Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? (Romans 10:12-14 NASB)

Note the emphases upon the *preacher* of the Gospel and the *hearing* of the Word of Christ in these well-known missionary verses. They may have even more significance than we usually ascribe to them.

We have a long tradition of literacy in the Western world, especially in North America. It is therefore understandable that we connect literacy campaigns, Bible translation, the distribution of Christian literature, and education in general with the Christian mission. But much of that part of the world that has yet to be reached with the Gospel is non-literate or, at best, semi-literate! For example, experts have concluded that no more than 20 percent of the population of Africa is literate and that no more than 10 percent would be able to understand a simple tract (1).

We may be even more surprised to learn that this state of affairs is not at all unlike the situation with which our Lord and His apostles had to deal in first-century Palestine. Herbert Klem writes the following about the people and situation of that time:

We may suppose that some people could read or chant the Scriptures but few people had books in their homes. Most of the use of Scriptures in the homes was done from memory. Christ could not think of reaching the masses with a new message in His century through books in Hebrew or any language. Barclay estimates that at the beginning of the fourth century the cost of having a scribe make a copy of the four Gospels would be about 91 British pounds.... That is nearly \$300. Similar costs in Christ's time would have prevented most people from being able to read our Lord's teachings (2).

Thus a very low level of literacy among the common people of Palestine plus the high cost of printed materials closely parallels the situation on many mission fields today. This puts us in a better position to understand Paul's exhortation to send preachers and his insistence that people everywhere should have an opportunity to *hear* and *believe* the Gospel. Though it may sound like a contradiction in terms, preaching, hearing and believing the Gospel constitute the A-B-Cs of the Christian mission.

By no means is this to be taken in such a way as to minimize the importance of Scripture translation and literature distribution. But we must recognize two principles that are extremely important to the evangelization of the world. First, *all* peoples (including so-called primitive peoples) have a tremendous ability to comprehend and retain orally-transmitted information. Most of the religious traditions of the world--often unusually voluminous and detailed traditions--were handed down from generation to generation for centuries before they were available in written form. Second, the plain command of Scripture is to make disciples of all the peoples of the world. This is manifestly impossible unless we include that large percentage of the world's population that

is non-literate. By no stretch of the imagination can our missionary forces teach everyone to read and write even if everyone in the world had the ability and interest to learn!

With the foregoing in mind, let us proceed by giving two illustrations of the potential inherent in an orally-communicated Gospel--one from personal experience and the other from the literature. Then we will close by drawing some conclusions.

New Christians on the Thai Border

Two or three years ago it was my privilege to spend some time in the refugee camps on the Thai border as a guest of the World Relief Commission of the National Association of Evangelicals. One Sunday morning I heard the strains of some unfamiliar music emanating from a large tent adjacent to our makeshift hospital facility. That music constituted an invitation to the morning worship service of about 400 refugees, most of whom were new Christians. The service lasted for about two hours and consisted of prayer, singing and, from an American point of view, an almost interminable sermon!

After the benediction I asked the missionary leader about various aspects of the service. One aspect that especially intrigued me was a congregational song that seemed to repeat the same melody over and over and lasted for about twenty minutes. My missionary friend was exuberant as he dispelled my ignorance about that song. He said,

Oh, that's a most beautiful song. You see, many of these new Christians are illiterate. And, in any case, literature in their language is hard to come by. So in order to make sure that they understand and remember who Christ is and what He had done for them, they have put the entire life of Christ to music. Every time they meet they sing it together. Moreover, they meet and sing and testify of their faith in Christ in spite of the fact that they have nothing in this world and in spite of the threats of some non-Christians who swear that they will kill every Christian believer when all are free to return to their own country.

Before we parted, this missionary--called out of retirement to minister to people in their own language--spoke in carefully measured and thankful words: "All my adult life I have ministered to people like these and in their own country. But I have never witnessed such a turning and dedication to Christ."

Teaching Non-literates in Luwuk Banggai

By way of further illustrating the capacity of non-literates for understanding, believing and obeying the Gospel, let us turn to the account provided by H. R. Weber in his little volume *The Communication of the Gospel to Illiterates* (3).

A remote area of Indonesia, Luwuk-Banggai was almost untouched until this century. Then in 1912, Muslim traders tried to convert some of its 100,000 scattered natives to Islam. Partly in response to the pleas of the Dutch government, the Reformed State Church sent a minister to the area. Over a few years he baptized thousands without proper instruction or follow-up.

Converts were of three types: 1) some were sincere; 2) some felt under obligation to adopt the religion of the rulers; and 3) some became Christians in order to remain pagan! (They thought that they had to accept either Christianity or Islam, and only the former would allow them to keep the pigs and dogs that were so important to their animistic sacrifices.)

After World War II there were 30,000 nominal Christians in churches in the area. They were Christians and congregations without the Word of God, and they were largely illiterates. In 1952 an experienced missionary by the name of H. R. Weber was asked to go teach them the basics of the Bible. He was given no money and no helpers except indigenous personnel.

The church was already divided into seven districts. Weber and his aides decided to hold short Bible courses in each district. A team of district evangelists and ministers was chosen, and each congregation was invited to send some leaders to a five-day Bible course in a central village. They were to pay for this in money or kind. They had, on the average, three years of elementary education.

The format was simple but profound.

By way of introduction, the importance of the Bible in the life of the Christian and congregation was stressed.

The first evening, the “travel route” to be taken through the Bible was sketched: Creation to Kingdom of God in Revelation with Christ at the center of the whole, including the Fall, the covenants with Israel, the church, and the Second Coming. The four succeeding days highlighted Gen. 3:1-19; Ex. 19:1-6; Luke 2:8-14; and Acts 1:6-11.

Each day began with worship, the reading of the Scripture passage of the day, and prayer for guidance. Then the passage was studied in small groups (making sure it was linked with preceding studies). Each group reported its findings and a summary was drawn up. (Later this was to be given to each student to help in teaching as a catechist.) Afternoons were spent in discussing community life, the meaning of baptism and communion, evangelism, etc. The evenings were spent in discussions concerning Christians in a tribal community, in relation to modern Islam, and in relation to the world.

On the last evening the witnessing theme was exemplified by inviting the whole village. The temple in Jerusalem was “created” and Psalms 24 and 100 were recited antiphonally by “priest” and “levite” and a chorus of men and women. Parables such as that of Luke 10:30-37 were mimed and people were asked to guess as to what was being presented. Then the parable was read from Scripture, explained, and a challenge was given. Hymns and tea-time followed. Finally, the Genesis 1 lesson of the first evening was balanced with Revelation 21 and its vision of a recreated world of peace and righteousness.

Weber himself made a great discovery as time progressed. He kept hearing about tremendous Christians who would like to attend the studies but could not because they were *buta huruf* (“blind with regard to letters,” i.e., non-literate). Realizing that the great majority of the people were non-literate, Weber started talking to some of them and discovered that, though he and they spoke the same language, they could hardly communicate. When he asked the meaning of a word, they would not respond with a synonym or an abstract transcription. They would use words to “paint a picture” that gave the exact meaning. When describing a person they would not talk about his character but rather tell of a few experiences that pointed out the kind of person he was. Weber began to look upon them as artists. He began to see himself as a stunted intellectual with but one method of communication--communication through pallid abstract ideas. He became a pupil in

order to learn how to communicate picturesquely and dramatically rather than intellectually. After some experiments, Weber instituted a series of Bible studies for non-literates on the model outlined above but modified so as to augment discourse with simple drawings.

Some Conclusions

As a result of his experience, Weber draws some principles for communicating the gospel to non-literates and semi-literates wherever they are to be found:

- 1) It is a mistake to treat these people as children and merely tell them Bible stories. All must be set in a complete redemptive history including creation and eschatology, Christ the center, the history of Israel, the church, and the mission. And all must be seen in contrast to the local mythological framework so that the Christian faith revolutionizes all patterns of thought.
- 2) It is fundamentally wrong to translate only the New Testament or New Testament portions. It is wrong to treat only New Testament stories. Jesus the Messiah must not be de-Judaized to the extent that He is de-historized. Otherwise Christianity tends to be placed in the framework of the mythological.
- 3) Once the mythological framework has been shattered, the classification and integrating character of “primitive thinking” should be seen as a great gift. The “primitive” is able to cope with any event because it can be absorbed into his myth. The Christian can cope because he knows the beginning, end, and center of history.

Weber's conclusions are worth pondering by all who are concerned for world evangelization. But his conclusions--and his entire experience--constitute overwhelming evidence that illiterates can indeed become informed Christians. In fact, their potential constitutes a challenge to all of us, not only to preach the Gospel but also to master the Book!

ENDNOTES

1. Klem, Herbert V. *Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights from African Art*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1982. P. 14.
2. *Ibid*, p. 67.
3. Weber, H. R. *The Communication of the Gospel to Illiterates*. Madras: The Christian Literature Society, n.d. and London: S.C.M. Press, Ltd., 1957.