

Storying the Storybook to Tribals: A Philippines Perspective of the Chronological Teaching Model

by Tom A. Steffen

This story approach to ministry works well among concrete-relational tribal people, especially non-literates. It has long been recognized that tribal people rely heavily on stories in order to socialize succeeding generations. Tribal people love to hear and tell stories. What Tom Clause says of native Americans is true of tribal people around the world: "Native Americans are great tellers" (1995:10).

In 1980, an evangelistic-discipleship model designed to reach tribal peoples living in urban or rural settings emerged under the leadership of Trevor McIlwain, a missionary ministering in the Philippines with New Tribes Mission. McIlwain called the model the "Chronological Teaching Approach." Within a few months, New Tribes Missions personnel were using the Chronological Teaching Model extensively throughout the archipelago. It soon spread to other countries where New Tribes Mission ministers. Numerous other mission agencies, such as the Southern Baptists, heard of the model and began implementing it in various fashions. Some have compiled contextualized teaching manuals for their personnel.

Since more than a decade has passed since the introduction of the Chronological Teaching model in the Philippines, I decided to return to the Philippines to evaluate the model's effectiveness within New Tribes Mission and other mission agencies that had adopted it, and investigate the adaptations made. A partial grant through Biola University and the generous gifts of friends turned my plans into a reality. This article documents the results of the evaluation made in June-July, 1993.

Procedures

To evaluate the model, a dual approach was used: a questionnaire and focus groups. The questionnaire gathers quantitative data while focus groups provide qualitative data. I felt the two-pronged analysis would effectively evaluate my hypothesis: Teaching the Bible chronologically to concrete-relational people, using a narrative approach, should result in: (1) national evangelists and teachers capable of teaching the various phases of the Chronological Teaching approach effectively, (2) followers who respect the national leaders, and (3) transformed relationships and use of resources (time/money).

The return of the questionnaires was disappointing with only 12 respondents from the 100 sent out. Logistics played a major role in the light return. The focus groups went much better. Six focus sessions (usually three hours in duration) were held at various locations on the islands of Mindanao and Luzon with 45 people participating, representing the following agencies: International Missions, Inc., New Tribes Mission, New Tribes Mission of the Philippines (Filipino branch), OMF, and YWAM (a Southern Baptist conference thwarted my connecting with Southern Baptist church planters, although I was able to obtain some of the Chronological Teaching curriculum they designed). Questions during the focus groups included:

1. What adjectives or phrases best characterize the Chronological Teaching approach from your/nationals' perspective?
2. What do you/nationals like best

about phases I, II, III, IV of the Chronological Teaching approach?

3. What do you/nationals like least about Phase I, II, III, IV?
4. What changes would you/nationals make in Phase I, II, III, IV?
5. How did the teachers'/recipients' behavior change due to this model?
6. What would you tell a friend interested in using this model?

Besides the focus groups, I conducted a number of individual interviews during my travels. Before data analysis, a brief overview of the Chronological Teaching model follows (Steffen 1993, 1994).

The Chronological Teaching Model

One of the most unique models that exists today for providing a firm foundation for the Gospel and an overview of the Bible is McIlwain's (1987; 1988; 1989; 1992) Chronological Teaching Model. McIlwain designed the model for long-term church planting rather than spot evangelism. He assumes Christian workers will build solid relationships, model Christianity and minister to physical and spiritual needs in tandem.

The model differentiates between felt needs and the Gospel, a distinction necessary to keep the focus of the message on Christ's efforts to restore our broken relationship with God. This is pertinent especially today in our pluralistic society when even some Evangelicals espouse universalism. The model clearly addresses the limitations of the anthropological theory of functional-

ism, i.e., focusing primarily on commonalities while tending to neglect contradiction and confrontation. It recognizes that conversion is a process as well as an event. It communicates well with concrete-relational thinkers due to its story format, and presents the big picture before introducing isolated parts and calls for constant repetition. It calls for laying a solid Old Testament foundation before presenting the Gospel, and it builds on the evangelistic foundation in a way that provides a comprehensive understanding of the entire Bible for believers in a short period of time.

The Chronological Teaching Model challenges current evangelism models (and Bible translation approaches) that begin in the New Testament. Such evangelism models, McIlwain would argue, do not provide listeners: (1) sufficient time for worldview challenge, or (2) sufficient foundational information to adequately comprehend the story of Jesus Christ. These truncated evangelism models are like asking a person to begin reading a book in the middle, rather than at the beginning, yet draw the author's conclusion. This requires the reader to make numerous uninformed guesses about the settings, characters, plot, episodes and theme(s) which may or may not be those of the author.

McIlwain urges Christian workers to begin evangelism with an overview of the history of redemption, beginning with Genesis and continuing through the ascension of Jesus Christ (Phase 1). Says McIlwain:

“We must not teach a set of doctrines divorced from their God-given historical setting, but rather, we must teach the story of the acts of God as He has chosen to reveal Himself in history. People may ignore our set of doctrines as our Western philosophy of God, but the story of God's actions in history cannot be refuted” (1987:81).

To accomplish this, McIlwain developed 68 lessons—42 from the Old

Testament and 26 from the New Testament. These lessons deal with the nature and character of God, Satan, and humanity. Designed primarily for unbelievers, the lessons are helpful also for believers in that they demonstrate the preparatory role the Old Testament plays in evangelism. Key words for the first phase are separation (from God) and solution (through Jesus Christ).

McIlwain emphasizes four basic themes in the evangelism phase. The first theme explores the character of God, who is supreme and sovereign. He communicates with humanity, is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent and holy. The second theme examines Satan's role—how he fights against God, holds humanity captive and is characterized by lying and deceiving. The third theme deals with humanity. Because of inherited and practiced sin all people are separated from their Creator. The fourth theme focuses on Jesus Christ who is God, man, holy, righteous and the only Savior. The interweaving of these four issues, argues McIlwain, allows for full understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which becomes the good news that God intends it to be in that the themes provide sufficient background for basic comprehension (See Figure 1). McIlwain fully expects listeners to be ready to receive the Gospel at the completion of Phase I teaching, if not before.

Phase II moves forward to demonstrate security in Christ, and contrasts this with separation and death that result apart from Him (Phase I). For example, in Phase I, due to lack of faith in God, unbelievers are found outside the closed door of the ark (separation). Death is inevitable. In Phase II, however, believers are safe within the ark behind the closed door. Faith in God results in safety and security.

By reviewing Genesis through the ascension of Christ, new themes are introduced in the lessons and further foundational material is provided as prep-

aration for Phases III and IV. For example, in that the ministry of the Holy Spirit is emphasized in the Gospels, Phase II highlights certain aspects of that ministry so that when the topic reappears in Acts (in Phase III), the listeners can build easily upon the previous background, thereby equipping them for spiritual battle and the advancement of the Kingdom.

The third phase begins with a brief overview of the book of Acts to introduce new believers to church life: the Power behind God's kingdom, the conflict with Satan's kingdom, the Christian life, miracles, instruction, worship, food, prayer, giving, conflict resolution, leadership and followership roles, and God's vision for planting and equipping new communities of faith in strategic areas of the world. Other emphases include: the spread of Christianity from Jews to Gentiles, and from Jerusalem to Rome. Subject matter in this phase provides the foundation for Phase IV, the Epistles and Revelation. (See Figure 1).

In Phase IV, new believers receive a brief overview of the remainder of the New Testament, with special attention given to their position in Christ, their relationship to the Holy Spirit, their daily walk, the function of the church and eschatological teachings. Teachers present thematic outlines for each book (whole to part), and cover briefly the basic content, tying it to the previous phase and applying it to the present context. They emphasize the concrete elements found in the text.

Phase V returns to Genesis and continues through the ascension of Christ, emphasizing God's methods of sanctifying and maturing his sons and daughters. This phase targets maturing believers. Sanctification now becomes the key word for Phase V, and for the remaining phases. Phase VI covers the book of Acts in a detailed, verse-by-verse exposition of each passage. The final phase deals with the

remaining New Testament letters expositively, emphasizing the believer's walk, church functions and God's final plan for the universe.

In that only two participants had any experience in phase V (none had moved beyond Phase V), the data evaluated for this project deals specifically with phases I-IV.

Overview of the Data

At this point I will isolate the representative comments made in answer to each of the focus group questions, along with formative information gleaned from the questionnaires. Personal perspectives of the data follow.

1. What adjectives or phrases best characterize the Chronological Teaching approach from your/nationals' perspective? This question always met with quick responses—so quick, in fact, I found it difficult to keep up with my note taking. Not only were the responses quick, they were also very positive. A sample of the comments follows:

It's clear, comprehensive, compelling and simple.

It's Bible-centered.

It provides many opportunities to correct thinking without turning off the audience.

It lays a firm foundation for the Gospel.

It works well with concrete-relational thinkers.

It works well with all ages.

It is the most effective means of communicating biblical truth cross-culturally.

It gives me more confidence as a teacher.

Nationals and expatriates often repeated the last comment: "It gives me more confidence as a teacher." If confident teachers make better teachers, then the Chronological Teaching model warrants further investigation.

2. What do you/nationals like best about Phase I, II, III, IV? What the participants appreciated most about phases I-IV can be summarized under

three categories: God's message, God's character, and people's misconceptions.

It clarifies God's message. The Chronological Teaching model demonstrates respect for God's Word in its entirety by outlining God's plan for the world from beginning to end. Com-

The Chronological Teaching model demonstrates respect for God's Word in its entirety by outlining God's plan for the world from beginning to end.

ments such as the following capture the preference for such an approach: "No one has ever taught us this way before. Before, the teaching was fragmented, making it difficult to follow." One people group claimed: "This (Chronological Teaching) is our way of teaching (holistic)."

Phases I-IV help clarify God's main message to humanity: as sovereign Lord he not only deserves our full allegiance and worship, he demands it. Listeners who go through the four phases will hear this message repeatedly.

The model helps people comprehend clearly the character of God. Through Bible stories of God's interaction with people, unbelievers grasp his righteousness and grace from a biblical perspective. They soon recognize that a

distant God desires to become a close friend. For believers, a personal God interested in one's day-to-day activities becomes evident. The Chronological Teaching model helps both unbelievers and believers "clarify who God is."

Clarifies human misconceptions. This model provides people ample time to change their minds about what they have substituted as Lord. This is done in a nonthreatening way in that the Bible stories and letters contrast personal and group beliefs and lifestyles with God's expectations. The recipients must interact with God's word rather than the laws of some new religion propagated by outsiders. "Truth repeated," stated one participant, "becomes more easily acceptable."

One of the areas addressed by this model is human manipulation of God through a variety of rituals. The selected teachings demonstrate vividly the ineffectiveness of such manipulation to gain God's favor for salvation or sanctification. This, in turn, helps sever the roots of syncretism and legalism.

3. What do you/nationals like least about Phase I, II, III, IV? This question began to reveal some of the jagged edges surrounding the Chronological Teaching model. I list the points of concern in order of suggested severity, from minor to major. Theological oversights. A number of concerns voiced related not so much to what was covered in the model, but what was excluded, or the sequence of the presentation. Questions arose concerning whether the Chronological Teaching model spent sufficient time addressing spiritual warfare, Psalms and Proverbs, the life of Christ and short-term witnessing.

There were those who did not feel the necessity of covering Phase II. For them, more important matters deserved prior attention, such as, teaching on fasting (which created a servant attitude), the gifts of the Holy Spirit, prayer, witnessing and spiritual formation. One

church planter lamented: “We did not get into Romans quick enough to address ways to restore the many personal broken relationships that now called for healing.”

Cultural insensitivity. The areas of cultural insensitivity surrounded the issue of sin, storytelling, obtaining feedback, and determining the reception of the Gospel.

In relation to the sin issue, How does saving face and being told repeatedly you are a sinner go together? Said one participant: To “beat people over the head that they are sinners in this culture”, as done in Phase I, “is not necessary.” While no one wanted to remove necessary barriers to conversion, a good number of the participants called for more sensitivity in this key cultural area.

Some felt the need to tie Bible stories to life-related beliefs and behaviors. For example, rather than merely present the story of Cain and Abel, begin by asking: What happens when two brothers fight (a key issue for some people groups in the Philippines)? The Cain and Abel story would then take on greater relevance. For audiences with a Catholic background, define the sin of Adam and Eve as disobedience rather than sexual misconduct. Contrasting Bible stories to key worldview beliefs and behaviors should also help audiences move beyond traditional mythology to acceptance of the biblical perspective.

From north to south, Christian workers raised the issue of how to discover significant feedback. Direct questions used in the Chronological Teaching model frequently failed to illicit the information needed. In fact, many people groups, due to the shame factor or cultural expectations of the student and teacher roles, would not respond to direct questions in public. This left the teachers wondering how well they communicated the phases.

The Chronological Teaching

model calls for conducting interviews at the end of Phase I to determine who has accepted Christ as Savior. Those passing the interview move on to Phase II. Creating separate classes within people groups who had few if any private meetings raised a number of questions and created suspicion in the minds.

Phases too lengthy. While this category could be placed under cultural insensitivity, it seems to stand alone. The most common complaint heard in all the focus groups was the length of the phases. Most of the participants would consider the following phrase accurate for their audiences: “It takes too long to teach.” Some solved the problem for Phase I by cutting the lessons from the suggested 68 to an average of 31 (see Table 1 below). This reduced the overall time for the phase to an average of 20 weeks. The comments that follow capture the concern of those interviewed.

“What constitutes a good foundation for the Gospel (Phase I)?”

The lessons are “hopelessly overloaded” and “absent of curriculum development skills.”

“We’re lucky to get three (teaching) shots at people.”

“The teacher’s credibility comes into question if over a long phase the teacher misses sessions because of sickness or work. The teacher’s time is also important.”

“How can we get it (Chronological Teaching approach) in a more concise form without sacrificing its content?”

Those working in urban settings found the time factor extremely important. With residents exposed to complex, competing cults, religions, various interpretations of the Bible, and also extremely busy, getting them to commit to a long series of lessons becomes very difficult. Said one urban church planter: “It would be great to teach this, but it is impossible.”

4. *What changes would you/nationals make in Phase I, II, III, IV?* The solutions proposed by the Christian workers

and nationals demonstrated a desire to retain as much of the Chronological Teaching model as possible, without becoming culturally insensitive. Their attempts to balance program with process follows.

Theological oversights. While some expressed the need for the inclusion of more teaching in the area of spiritual warfare and Psalms and Proverbs, I received little constructive feedback as to how to accomplish this.

Cultural insensitivity. Some participants answered the issue of saving face and confronting one’s sin by shortening the number of lessons in Phase I. They felt listeners could still grasp the issue of separation from a holy God without excess repetition, and more importantly, the seeker would feel much freer to continue the study.

Concerning the use of strictly Bible stories in a phase, some solved the problem by using traditional stories to lead into Bible stories. Others “used cultural illustrations to get to the heart of a story.”

Discerning the feedback method of choice has not been easy. For many, the lesson questions designed to illicit feedback failed. Typical responses to the questions included: “We’re ashamed to answer.” and “We forgot everything.” However, when a Christian worker now introduces questions to a people group not accustomed to such, they now become upset if the teacher forgets to ask questions. In urban settings, some found competition between sexes and age groups a natural way to gain feedback.

Discerning the interview method of choice continues. Lessons learned in the use of questions in relation to lessons also apply when trying to discern a person’s reception of the Gospel. Some opted for informal or formal testimonies. Others used questions that called for expanded answers so a professing believer could not just parrot

another's answers. Some found house-to-house interviews advantageous. For certain people groups, "Outside persecution tells which step they've taken."

One of the most surprising findings of the focus groups was the reported number of listeners who received Christ during Phase II rather than Phase I. The review of the Phase I lessons, plus the contrast between separation and security seemed to result in clarity and conviction. For many, Phase II made Phase I comprehensible.

Phases too lengthy. Practitioners took a number of approaches to address the lengthiness of the phases. Some curriculum designers sliced lessons from the phases, "selecting stories applicable to [their target] people." Another cautioned: "It's not how fast you go, but how much the people understand."

Teaching tips. Several valuable teaching tips surfaced during the discussion of question four. One team stressed the need to team teach so as to avoid burnout. This would be true for Filipino teachers as well in that once any teacher begins teaching several phases simultaneously, teaching "becomes very complex."

In relationship to leadership development, one participant commented: "I don't just turn the teaching over to nationals. I talk to the teachers about prayer, preparation time, the pastoral role, not just the teaching role."

5. How did the teacher's/recipient's behavior change due to this model? How well does this evangelistic-discipleship model transform the behavior of the teachers and recipients? The data developed from the questionnaire, shows that the teachers' and recipients' relationships change the same amount at 2.9 (out of a possible 4). Teachers showed a slightly higher transformation (2.8 in contrast to 2.6) in

the use of time and money. The focus groups revealed a number of behavior changes resulting from the various phases.

"The teachers became more aggressive and confident in teaching"

"After teaching on giving in Phase III, our giving went from 3

It assumes that the teacher's and the audience's view of God, Satan, demons, angels, sin, judgment, heaven, hell, faith, salvation... are synonymous with those of Scripture. Have these Christian workers underestimated the profound complexity of the Gospel?

pesos to 500 pesos."

"Phase III created a world vision; they prayed for believers in the USA and began witnessing."

"The believers composed songs to go along with each of the stories."

"They took over the leadership completely. They developed lessons and taught them."

"Demons left believers because of teaching on the sovereignty of God."

"The teachers will take 2-3 days, traveling 30-80 kilometers, for one teaching session. The way God meets their needs along the way is a great witness to all."

6. What would you tell a friend interested in using this model? This ques-

tion completes the focus group questions. The following quotes reflect the broad perspective of the participants' feelings.

"It is the only way to get a clear understanding of the Bible in that it starts at the beginning and proceeds to the end."

"If you are going to be a purist (to the model), it's a long haul to the Gospel."

"It is an effective tool for evangelism. Go with the long presentation if the people have time."

"It needs teaching objectives."

"Its order makes sense. People can take it up and keep moving."

"I'd highly recommend it, but it must be tailored for each specific context."

"It fleshed out my church planting. I vary the methodology, but it provides a path to walk on. It links Bible study with church planting."

In this section I will highlight some additional data gleaned from the questionnaire, how-be-it limited in responses: (1) Attendance tended to hold steady throughout the phases with a good number of national teachers participating. (2) The teachers effectiveness correlates strongly to the quality of training received. (3) Respect from the audience tends to be higher among believers than unbelievers. (4) In the area of curricula, national teachers felt the most ownership with Phase I. Their involvement in the development of the curricula, for the most part, included translation. One expatriate acknowledged the need for more national input in the areas of illustrations and questions. Even so, nationals tend to promote the curricula to others. (5) Stories appreciated most tended to reflect each group's worldview. For example, stories tied to the themes of judgment (Sodom and Gomorrah) and resurrection (Enoch, Jesus) [Mindinao], the Ten Commandments [Luzon], and demon activity

[both] received high marks. Stories responded to least tended to come from the time of the kings and the captivities. Book studies addressing future events were big hits, while only II Timothy received a negative review.

Personal Reflections of the Data

It is always enlightening to watch how other people use something developed by an outsider. Such observations can result in a much better product. The same may be true for the Chronological Teaching model.

It soon became obvious that personnel from different agencies looked at the model from very different perspectives. Some saw the model as simply an extended evangelistic tool, therefore, the evangelist left the area after a very brief encounter with the audience (tourist model). Some had little difficulty seeing the wisdom of the use of stories, but their teaching came across piece-meal because they missed the encompassing themes that tied each phase together. Their stories became great stories rather than teaching tools.

Central to the diversification of the model's interpretation stands four basic tenets: (1) the level of language and culture necessary to communicate effectively, (2) the definition of the Gospel, (3) the type of church one expects to develop, and (4) the grasp of the Chronological Teaching model. How personnel from the various agencies defined these four areas determined to a great degree the types of changes introduced into the model.

In the area of language and culture acquisition, one major weakness jumped out. Most of the Christian workers had received surprisingly little

background in the principles of cross-cultural education, i.e. how people process and store information, and in the principles of curriculum development, yet found themselves heavily engaged in each. Lack of training in these areas results in a grave disservice to those to whom Christian workers minister in that it tends to hinder nationals from reproducing the various phases naturally (see Steffen 1993).

In the area of the Gospel, some felt a few stories with a quick overview of the four spiritual laws would suffice. Such a seemingly ethnocentric attitude may reveal a lack of cultural sensitivity. It assumes that the teacher's and the audience's view of God, Satan, demons, angels, sin, judgment, heaven, hell, faith, salvation, soul, decision-making, reciprocity, Jesus, the cross, to name a few components of the Gospel message, are synonymous with those of Scripture. Have these Christian workers underestimated the profound complexity of the Gospel?

A major task standing before Christian workers not only in the Philippines, but around the world, is to produce hundreds of thousands of effective evangelists and Bible teachers. For this to become a reality, however, a prior step must take place—those hearing the message must not only be able to comprehend it, they must also be able to communicate it effectively to others through talk and walk.

How well did the data reflect my hypothesis? While improvements can be made in each of the three areas of concern, the quantitative and qualitative data support the hypothesis. Phases I-IV of the Chronological Teaching model, when contextualized, produce new and strong believers.

References Cited

- Claus, Tom , 1995 *Evangelism Strategies for Native Americans*. Native Discipleship in the Americas, pp.10-11,13.
- McIlwain, Trevor,
1987 *Building on Firm Foundations: Guidelines for Evangelism and Teaching Believers*, Vol. 1. Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission.
- 1988 *Building on Firm Foundations: Guidelines for Evangelism and Teaching Believers*, Vols. 2-3. Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission.
- 1989 *Building on Firm Foundations: Guidelines for Evangelism and Teaching Believers*, Vols. 4-6. Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission.
- 1992 *Firm Foundations: Creation to Christ*. Sanford, FL: New Tribes Mission.
- Steffen, Tom A.
1993 *Passing the Baton: Church Planting That Empowers*. La Habra, CA:Center for Organizational & Ministry Development.
- 1994 "A Narrative Approach to Communicating the Bible, Part 1." *Christian Education Journal*, 24 (3): 86-97.
- 1994 "A Narrative Approach to Communicating the Bible, Part 2." *Christian Education Journal*, 24 (3): 98-109.
- 1994 "The Use of Narratives in Evangelism and Discipleship." *Church Planter's Link* 5(1): 4-7, 15.

Dr. Tom Steffen is Professor of Intercultural Studies at Biola University in La Mirada, CA