

Sustainable Scripture engagement by Durk Meijer, March 31, 2016

How will a sustained Bible literacy look like for a given people group?

Some say that 'Biblical Literacy' describes 'the ability and motivation of people to read the Bible with sufficient understanding so that they can explain its basic meaning, having sufficient knowledge and skill to use resources that enable them to discern the basic meaning of a biblical text.' This description sadly enough doesn't allow oral preference communicators to be Bible literate, since it validates Bible literacy only in the context of a person being able to read. It also alleges that it is essential to use other resources than the Bible.

I would suggest that we should call Bible literate as being able to understand the overarching story of the Bible, to find specific stories or teaching, and to engage with those. Contrary to popular belief, it is not necessary to be able to read for a person to be Bible literate, since the Bible can equally be in the form of an audio recording. Bible literacy can only be acquired through a sustained exposure to and engagement with Scripture. Over time this provides the crucial contextual background information for effective and correct understanding of the whole Biblical narrative.

Bible literacy in some ways is like any kind of literacy. It is useful to the extent of the amount of the Bible we have been exposed to, as well as how much we have internalized. If we don't engage and practice, we can lose it and as such there will be a post Bible literate society. God tells us in his Word that the scriptures simply are to be told to our children, so the truths of Scripture become part of their lives. If the Scriptures really become part of us in that way, then all of us will keep growing in Bible literacy. Maturity of faith should be easily attained by using solely the scriptures and accepting the basic truths it teaches us directly. God included all the details in each passage that He specifically wanted us to know in order to learn from it.

I worked with a group of people in Asia that at one point had only access to the preaching of the gospel and their Bible literacy was limited to what they had heard. This reflected itself in how they were engaging with God. They were stunted in their growth, yet since they didn't have access to more Scripture, they didn't realize it. Their interest to learn more was even limited, since they thought that all they needed was new life in Jesus. There were challenges in their society, like physically beating their wives and the Holy Spirit was making them feel that this was wrong. Since this was something that was bothering them, it provided an open door for Bible literacy, since the Scriptures advocate respect for women. Once aware of Scripture being able to speak to this, one of their leaders started translating the book of Ruth. As he told the story to the people, it served as a first step to them becoming further interested in the Bible. This is an example of Scripture engagement through which Bible literacy can start among a people that never had been exposed to it.

Being Bible literate is an essential component of God's community anywhere and for this reason it needs to be part of our work. It is very important that this happens from the start. The easiest way for most people to have God's Word as part of who they are, is to help them engage with the Bible in ways that fit their natural oral communication art forms. Even for literate people, knowing Bible stories is essential in becoming Bible literate. A simple story overview, like suggested by the concept of a stick person as shared in 'Communicating the first piece,' can be a wonderful foundation that can serve us for our whole life. We can easily add more stories to this foundation and as long as we practice the truths we learn from them and keep telling the stories, they remain a part of us. They provide an infrastructure

that helps us learn additional stories. This helps us engage further with Biblical details. If we compare this to a puzzle, it is like adding one new piece at a time that connects with a piece that is already in place.

Since most people don't get the chance to engage with God's Word this way, Bible literacy is very low worldwide. Yes, literate people may be able to find things in the Bible using indexes and other tools, but that doesn't make them Bible literate. I find very few people that have a good grasp of the overarching story of the Bible and even less that know a significant amount of stories that can serve as a foundation for being Bible literate. Without Scripture engagement, no one can be Bible literate. Oral approaches that use the benefit of memorizing, engaging with, and telling Bible stories are actually an excellent method for everybody, regardless whether they are highly literate and learned scholars living in a city or a nomadic shepherd living in the desert.