Orality as Holistic Communication

Vol. 1 No. 2 (2024)

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Orality in academic writing: As a journal catering to the academic audience while aiming to engage oral learners, we have established a system to rate contributions based on their orality reliance level, ranging from very high (■■■■ i.e., artistic expression) to very low (■□□□□ i.e., scholarly article).

Next issue: Vol. 1 No. 3 (2024) will focus on, but is not limited to, the arts and digital media. Check out our submission guidelines and contribute to OTJ.

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The OralityTalks Journal: Orality as Holistic Communication

Charles Madinger

Orality is so simple. It clarifies how God made us to communicate as children in his image. Orality is, therefore, infinitely complex and calls for mastery of what makes human communication work best. But the term "orality" sticks in the throat. We tend to constrain the phenomenon using terms related to hearing and speaking (aural). Not everyone who communicates possesses those capacities – like deaf people.

Missionaries, educators, translators, and pastors call for a more accurate and descriptive term and definition. Others prefer to go down the historic path Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan paved in the mid-twentieth century. They framed the early discussion around reading/comprehension literacy.

We move from that conceptual foundation to a more holistic approach – orality as "learned ways of expressing our minds and hearts through all five senses." It requires and *includes the whole person, the whole brain*, and a *whole cultural and social context*. It is all about how God gave us the capacity to connect with others and make our message stick. Africans can light up the room using proverbs. The sound of the harmonium stirs Pakistanis into clapping and dancing a message. Alongside stories and other artistic creative expressions, it kicks the brain into auto-memory mode.

Moving further from the exclusive use of "orality" to describe communication reveals even more in our Kingdom mandate. Orality can then lead to an operational definition when we identify specific traits remaining constant across any given people group. The GOMAP survey identified 15 characteristics of orality in communication that demonstrate the consistency needed to clarify how to communicate best and relate to any people group.

Then, once we identify where any people group lands on the spectrum of orality reliance, we can build even more effective communication strategies (a missiological definition). Jesus communicated what his father commanded and HOW he was commanded to do that (John 12:48-49, NLT). He integrated multiple disciplines, ensuring everyone eventually understood his message and no one would forget it.

Ong rightly pointed us to some of those disciplines – psychology (educational, neroscience, cognitive processing and mnemonics, etc.), sociology, and anthropology, and the insights from literature and literacies. Yet global mission strategies suggest many others. That said, Jesus used all of these and more to faithfully fulfill his mission.

This issue of *the Orality Talks Journal* goes down some of these paths. The main presenters in the Orality Talks Webinar contribute their work in article format for your examination here. Future OT Journals feature more reflective responses from those attending, recordings, case studies demonstrating real-world application, and creative artistic expressions.

Readers will gain tremendous insight from all the authors, and we express our gratitude to Jay Moon and Wayne Dye for their challenges to go beyond our previous conclusions to new horizons for the 21st century.

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Discipleship in Oral Preference Cultures

W. Jay Moon

Abstract: There are many indigenous genres available that are often overlooked for discipleship in oral preference cultures. This article explores both the Sicangu Lakota Native American culture as well as the Builsa culture in Ghana, West Africa to demonstrate the value and use of indigenous symbols, rituals, dance, proverbs, songs and stories for contextualized approaches to discipleship. Drawing from various anthropological theories, examples are provided to demonstrate how these oral genres can address excluded middle issues in order to create missiological transformation. Since these indigenous genres are embedded in culture, wise disciple makers can apply this discipleship approach for the formation of cultural and biblical identity. In the process, this can help disciples overcome the common dangers of both syncretism and split-level Christianity.

Keywords: genres, Ghana, intercultural discipleship, orality, middle issues, USA, worldview
Orality reliance level: Low orality reliance ■■□□□

This article is adapted from Moon (2023).

Can you walk with me?

Richard came to Asbury Theological Seminary as a doctoral student in the intercultural studies program, and I was blessed to be one of his professors. At the end of a course on the indigenous church, Richard asked me, "Can you walk with me for ten years in this path of learning how to be fully Christian and fully Native? I'm a Sicangu Lakota and I grew up on the Rosebud reservation. I'd like you to meet me every year on the Rosebud reservation for a week. You can bring seminary students with you, and we will discuss and learn contextualization in the Sicangu Lakota culture." Thus began a journey where I learned from Richard how discipleship in the Western world is often treated as a science to change the way people think. Viewing discipleship from the perspectives of oral preference cultures, however, reveals that discipleship can also be considered an art that is meant to deeply transform the way people live.

Little did I know how transformative this journey would be as we experienced the oral arts in the Sincangu Lakota culture- from powwows, smudging, sun dance, sweat lodges, funerals, dances, stories, to building dedications! The course was called *Cross-cultural Learning Experience—Sicangu Lakota/Rosebud Sioux Reservation* through Sioux Falls Seminary (SFS) and continued for ten years (2005–2014) in partnership with Wiconi International (an organization founded/led by Richard Twiss). Most of the participants were SFS students in the Master of Divinity or MA in Intercultural Studies programs, but there were often others from outside the seminary who also participated.

Richard Twiss, Rosebud reservation (all photos taken during course by author, 2007)

In this article, I would like to share some of the insights that were helpful in this discipleship journey as we learned to critically contextualize Christian faith in an oral

preference culture. I will also add the use of oral arts in another oral preference culture in West Africa to supplement the insights from the Sicangu Lakota culture. This article will discuss:

1. A brief definition and description of intercultural discipleship.
2. Various oral art genres to foster discipleship for the Sicangu Lakota in the Rosebud reservation as well as among the Builsa people in Ghana, West Africa.
3. Examples of intercultural discipleship approaches using these art genres.

What is intercultural discipleship?

Disciple-makers often follow the practices they observed or learned in their own culture and assume that they are the best approach when engaging other cultures. As a Kikuyu proverb from Kenya notes, "He who does not travel thinks his mother is the world's best cook." How could our understanding and practice of discipleship change if we traveled the world and observed how Christians faithfully follow Jesus in other cultures? This intercultural perspective would reveal a very different approach to discipleship, often using a variety of oral genres.

Intercultural discipleship is defined as "The process of worldview transformation whereby Jesus followers center their lives on the Kingdom of God and obey Christ's commands in culture utilizing cultural available genre" (Moon, 2017). Several key terms here need explanation. First, discipleship is a lifelong process (not a program to graduate from) that focuses on worldview transformation. If a worldview is not transformed, then Christianity simply overlays a new belief system on top of an existing belief system to create either syncretism or "split level" Christianity. If discipleship transforms a worldview, however, then Richard will be able to identify fully as a Native American and fully as a Jesus follower. The goal of discipleship, then, is to empower people to allow Christ to be in the center of their daily issues and concerns, rather than simply graduating from a program (Hiebert, 1984).

When our focus is reorienting our lives to allow Jesus to direct our daily decisions and actions, then the ways we address various issues from the local culture will change. For this reason, we cannot simply adopt a discipleship program from mainstream American culture and insert it into Native American culture. The issues and concerns that Richard deals with are very different from what I have experienced. Over ten years, Richard shared several of these cultural issues that were uniquely Sicangu Lakota concerns. Thankfully, God provides various indigenous oral genres to help Richard deal with these unique cultural issues and concerns.

Richard (2000) explained that when he first came to Jesus, he was told to cut his hair and attend the local church to just fit into what the Anglo culture portrayed as being "a good Christian." After a while, though, it just didn't feel right. He knew his Sicangu Lakota culture had much to offer that he was missing. He said, "I recognize that there is demonic influence in my own culture, but why should I leave one demon-influenced culture and adopt another demon-influenced culture? Why not start with the culture God has already given me?" Instead of throwing out the baby with the bath water by rejecting his own culture, how might he allow Jesus to transform his own worldview?

Transforming Worldviews

Since the term "worldview" is a key part of the discussion, I will use an anthropological definition by Paul Hiebert (2008), who described worldview as

> The foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives. It encompasses people's images or maps of the reality of all things that they use for living their lives. pp. 25–26

Hiebert noted that the worldview is not simply a set of beliefs in the head; rather, it also includes what people love and what they value. James K. A. Smith (2016) is fond

of saying that people become what they love, not simply what they think. If people come to Christ and they simply adopt a new cognitive belief system but they still love the things of the world, guess how they are going to act? They will act like people of the world! A transformation of the worldview needs to include what people think but also what they love as well as what they value. Since the oral arts can affect not just what people think but also what they love and value, it provides a unique aid for discipleship in order to transform a worldview.

Deist vs. Folk Religious Frameworks

Hiebert (1999a) presents a paradigm that helps us understand religious frameworks and the task of intercultural discipleship (Diagram 1).
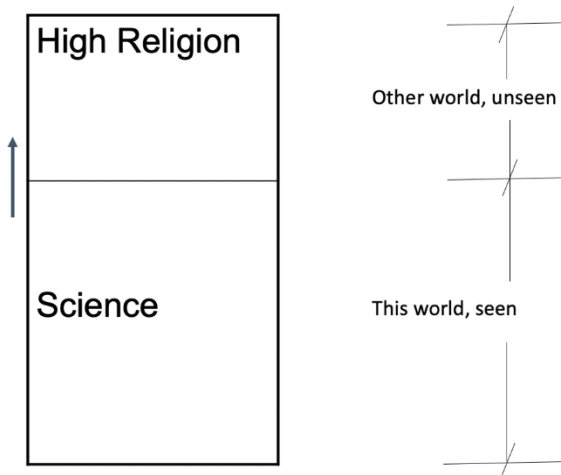

Diagram 1. Deist religious framework

In a deist religious framework, there tend to be two major areas from which people search for answers: science and high religion. Most questions reside in the area of science, such as when the baby gets sick, what medicine is needed? When there is a marital problem, what counselor can help? When considering a business decision, which business coach or business plan can help? These questions assume that what we can see will affect the issues and concerns of this world. The other area where people find answers is high religion. In this sector, questions are asked such as, How do you get to heaven when you die? What assurance can I have of

salvation? What is the reason for suffering? These are the ultimate questions of life. These questions assume that the spiritual forces we cannot see will affect the issues and concerns of the *other* world. Interestingly, this dividing line between these two sectors continues to move up as secularization drives people to ask more questions of science and fewer of high religion.

When stepping out of a deist religious framework (which categorizes much of Western culture) and entering the Sicangu Lakota culture where Richard grew up, Hiebert suggests a different religious framework in operation (see Diagram 2).
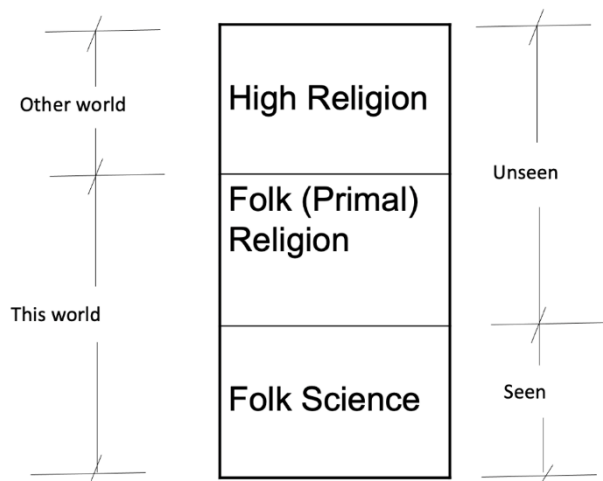
Diagram 2. Folk religious framework

There is still high religion, for questions about how the unseen forces affect the other world, and there is the folk science area, where visible forces affect this world, as described above. In addition, there is a third area in the middle. Hiebert explains that folk cultures have this "middle area" called "folk religion." This sector addresses questions concerning how unseen forces affect this world. I suggest that these "middle issues" are ripe for discipleship. If Christians do not engage these middle issues, then Richard's discipleship journey will become stuck. For example, the middle issues include concerns about when the baby gets sick (this-world concern), what spiritual forces can we go to for help (unseen forces). If there is no Christian response, then the Sicangu Lakota may visit a traditional healer or medicine man.

Likewise, if there is a marital issue or a business decision to be made, people search for spiritual guidance so that unseen spiritual forces can affect the concerns of this world. Once again, these are prime concerns for Richard to be able to live his faith in a way that is fully Christian and fully Sicangu Lakota. Each culture has unique issues and questions that are answered in this middle area. These issues tend to be abundant and critical for discipleship, particularly in folk cultures, since this is where the cultural practices and the claims of Christianity often intersect.

Hiebert (1999b) identified the following general categories of middle issues that are common in folk cultures:

- Guidance and the unknown (travel, marriage, business decisions)
- Reasons behind someone dying or living
- Misfortune and well-being (sickness, barrenness, crop failure, poverty)
- Evil and injustice (protection from evil, addictions)

These middle issues are the prime areas for Richard's discipleship journey, since these are the sort of questions Richard was often asked to address. These become the "bulls-eye" for discipleship in the Sicangu Lakota experience.

In short, the middle issues are the intimate questions and concerns that require unseen spirit power and guidance to affect change in this world. I've discussed Hiebert's definition of middle issues here because these issues are not only for Richard Twiss on the Rosebud reservation. Increasingly in Western culture, people are not finding answers in either science or high religion, resulting in the "crisis of secularism" (Keller, 2016). Science alone has not been providing sufficient answers for increasing numbers of people in the Western world related to areas of purpose, meaning or deep values, thereby drawing them to spirituality. If those questions are not addressed, then people may go to psychics, horoscopes, or other sources. If these discipleship issues are not addressed, then spiritual formation suffers, often resulting in syncretism or "split-level" Christianity.

Genres available in culture

If these middle issues are the target for disciples like Richard, then most cognitive styles of discipleship rarely hit the target. The oral arts, however, provide plenty of darts that hit the target directly! Thankfully, God provides these genres in culture to help Richard engage these cultural concerns such that he can identify himself as fully Christian and fully Sicangu Lakota (not one or the other). Here is a sample of the oral art genres available in culture:

- Symbols
- Rituals
- Dance
- Proverbs
- Music
- Stories
- Drama
- Holism

Why are these genres so important? Mikhael Bahktin explains, "Each genre provides a specific way of visualizing a given part of reality since they each combine specific blindnesses and insights" (Morson and Emerson 1990, pp. 275–276). Each genre, that is, provides unique strengths for discipleship to address middle issues in that culture. While language unifies a people and their perspective of reality, genres also stratify language and culture so that each genre provides a different perspective (Holquist 1981, p. 429). When taken together, a more complete picture of the cultural worldview is evident. In addition, these arts then provide a treasure chest for addressing intercultural discipleship concerns! This is important since this is often overlooked in typical discipleship approaches that focus on cognitive change but neglect the arts to produce life transformation.

In Richard's culture, while the Lakota language unifies the Sicangu Lakota people, the various symbols and rituals portray unique

aspects of the culture that other genres miss. The goal of intercultural discipleship is to make use of various genres to form robust disciples of Jesus. If these genres are disregarded or rejected, then significant aspects of Richard's discipleship will be overlooked. Though some in the orality movement often champion the use of storytelling for discipleship, for example, that is not the first area that the Sicangu Lakota often go to for spirituality. Richard explained that the Sicangu Lakota will often apply the genres of symbols, rituals, and dance to engage the spirit world. These genres are then the oral arts that should be explored for an intercultural discipleship approach.

Symbols in discipleship

For Richard, a key part of his discipleship journey is to engage the world of symbols. A symbol is "something present that stands for something absent" (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 6)—something you see, smell, and touch can stand for something that you can't see, smell, or touch. Robert S. Ellwood (1983) noted, "Even the plainest symbols . . . are magic portals into the other world where the truth of one's religion is visible, felt, and far overshadows the inconsistent ordinary" (p. 66). To understand how Richard can apply Sicangu Lakota symbols for discipleship, we look to Victor Turner's (1967) three properties of symbols, which I will quickly summarize. Although Turner's work is now dated, his seminal research was conducted among a folk culture in Africa that provided a groundbreaking understanding of how symbols can function when used well.

One Symbol and Many Meanings

The first property of symbols is called the condensation property. This means that one symbol condenses various meanings (Figure 1).

For example, sage is grown on the Rosebud reservation, and it represents the cleansing of sacred space. During all of the Sicangu Lakota rituals I participated in, sage was burned such that the smoke filled the

space and the aroma provided a unique smell. I attended a native ritual and the lady walking in next to me inhaled a deep breath when she smelled the sage. She exclaimed, "That's the smell of forgiveness!" I wish every family and people group had the smell of forgiveness to create an environment where it's time to forgive each other. The sage smell can also represent holiness or consecrating something to be holy. One symbol, sage, condenses the various meanings of cleansing sacred space, forgiveness, and holiness.
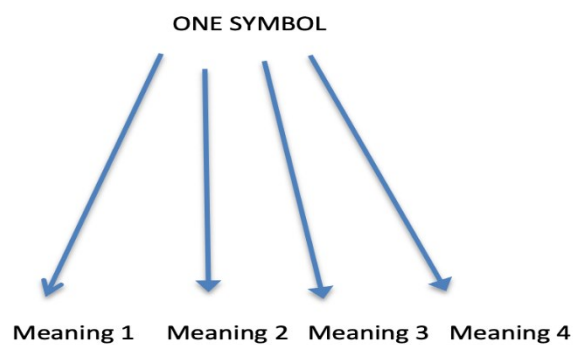
Figure 1. Condensation:
One Symbol and Many Meanings

Many Symbols and One Meaning

Turner describes a second property of symbols called the unification property. This means that many symbols are united by one meaning. This is somewhat opposite (but complementary) to the first property (Figure 2).
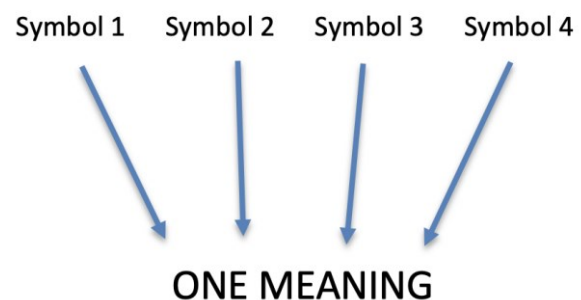
Figure 2. Unification:
Many Symbols and One Meaning

Picture 2 shows a smudging ceremony on the Rosebud reservation with Pastor Casey Church. Notice the various symbols used that

Picture 2. Casey Church on the Rosebud reservation

are unified by one meaning. There is sage in the middle of the abalone shell, along with a pipe (including tobacco that is sacred), a red cloth and red strips on his shirt (a sacred color), and an eagle feather. All of these symbols together proclaim that you are entering a holy experience. When somebody walks into this setting, they expect a holy experience.

Symbols Unite Sensory and Ideological Poles

The third property of symbols that Turner described is one of the most powerful. This is called the polarization property. This means that one symbol can connect two experiences that are normally polar opposites. Symbols connect both an ideology and a sensory experience (Table 1).

Ideological Pole	Sensory Pole
Beliefs	Feelings
Norms	Needs
Values	Appetites & desires
Head	Heart
What you *should* do	What you *want* to do

Table 1. One Symbol Connects the Sensory and Ideological Poles

Connecting these two poles is rare. Normally, the ideological pole is in focus when people discuss beliefs, norms, and values. These are the cognitive areas that you should know in your head, and these are the things that you *should* do for right behavior. This is often separated from the sensory pole. The sensory pole includes the experiences, feel-

Picture 3. Burning sage for smudging ritual

ings, needs, appetites, and desires that affect your heart (not mind), and these are the things that you *want* to do. A symbol connects the ideological and sensory poles to help you want to do what you should do. Often, disciples know what they should do, but they simply do not have the will to obey it. A well-placed symbol overcomes this tension to form disciples who obey what they should do. Picture 3 and the following story present an example of how sage can be used to unite the ideological and sensory poles.

Another Native American seminary student told me that every morning and evening, he burned the sage and used the eagle feather to brush the smoke around his body, starting at his legs, then his midsection, and finally up to the top of his head. He said this reminds him of the Holy Spirit cleansing and making his body clean and holy. He does this to help him overcome his addiction to pornography. He tried a lot of other approaches that simply did not work. He knew what he *should* do, but he didn't have the will to break what he *wanted* to do. The symbol made him

want to do what he should do in order to further his discipleship in this area. As the sage smell clung to his clothing throughout the day, it reminded him that his body was a holy temple whom God cleansed and sanctified. This polarization property of symbols helped him address this intimate concern that needed spiritual power to overcome. In Turner's terms, the symbol aroused the sensory pole (what he wants to do) to connect to the ideological pole (what he should do) in order to provide transformation.

For Richard's discipleship then, often the starting point is the selection of appropriate symbols to address middle issues to help him stay focused on Jesus and follow him more deeply. One symbol can condense many meanings, and many symbols can drive home one meaning. In addition, a symbol can combine a sensory and ideological pole to create a powerful experience. Hence, the genre of symbols is crucial for intercultural discipleship. To make the power of symbols even more evident for discipleship, symbols then become building blocks or the molecules for rituals.

Rituals Drive Faith Deep to the Bone

Rituals are a crucial part of the Sicangu Lakota experience. As a result, they are important for Richard's discipleship journey. Arnold Van Gennep (1960) studied rituals from around the world and observed a common structure in ritual performance that included three distinct stages. Though he was primarily studying the rites of passage during lifecycle events, this same ritual structure also appears in other types of rituals, such as festivals, pilgrimages, retreats, celebrations, and calendrical rituals. The three-stage structure is diagrammed in Figure 3.

People entering a ritual are separated from normal time/space; they enter ritual time/space. This transition space is characterized by liminality. When done well, the ritual concludes with the participants reincorporating into normal time/space but at a
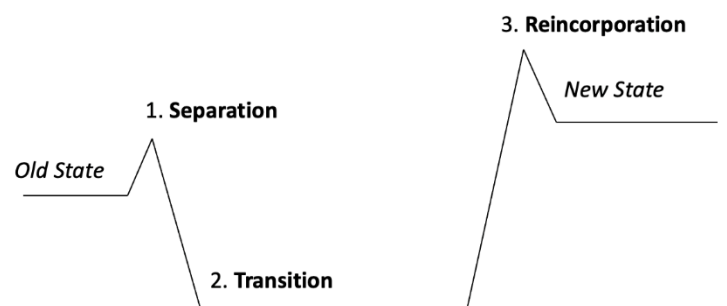
Figure 3. Ritual Process Structure: Three Stages

higher spiritual level. The following story portrays the *Inipi* ritual (sweat lodge). Notice how symbols are embedded in the ritual to promote transformation:

Intense Encounter with Jesus (with Randy Woodley, from Moon, 2015, pp. 172-74).

Standing in shorts and bare feet, participants tentatively wait in a single-file line. Quietly, they approach a stick with an eagle feather tied at the top, blowing gently in the wind.

"If you have any animosity or resentment toward someone, you must confess it here," Randy explains.

"Then you are ready to go inside the sweat lodge. We will wait until you are ready." His voice trails off.

As each person approaches the feather, his or her face reveals deep reflection and honest soul-searching.

Some take longer than others.

As each person enters, Randy offers burning sage to those who desire to "bathe" themselves with the smoke. The smoke reminds them of God's presence, which cleanses sacred spaces. They are about to enter a sacred space amid sacred time.

Bending down, they each crawl on hands and knees to find a spot to sit inside the small circular enclosure. With the entrance still open, light peeks through, revealing anxiety on the faces of the participants. Will I be able to endure the heat? Will I be freaked out by the darkness? Is it safe here? Such questions run through their minds.

Having concluded the separation stage, they prepare for the transition stage.

FLLLPPP. The entrance flap is closed. It is pitch-dark. Huddled close to one another, some of the women grab each other's hands for support. This is instantaneous communitas (close bonding) created by this liminal condition. After hot rocks are ushered into the middle of the floor, water is poured over them to create steam that fills the enclosure.

Randy starts with a song. The small tentlike enclosure is filled with praise. Following a few choruses, he gives the opportunity for anyone to offer a song to God.

Round two.
More rocks enter.
More heat.
More steam.

"Pass this dipper of water to the person on your left," Randy whispers. "When you receive it, drink all of it. Then you can offer some words to the group. The only stipulation is that they must be words that have come from your heart."

Veiled by the darkness, deep thoughts and feelings emerge from the participants, one by one. These feelings have been bottled up for a long time. Perhaps they went Sunday to Sunday, hoping to share them with someone at church but never had the opportunity. These "middle issues" do not simply go away.

The last person drinks the water.

Round three. As more rocks are brought in, the heat and steam accumulate. Sweat pours from the participants' bodies. Randy now offers words of encouragement and advice. Using Scripture and wisdom accumulated over the years, he addresses the intimate "middle issues" that people have revealed earlier. The liminal condition prepares people to listen closely without distractions. They take the words to heart. It has been over ten years since I first experienced this, and I can still remember the words that Randy spoke to me.

FLLLPPP. The flap is opened again. Light and refreshing air flood the enclosure. One by one we crawl out of the enclosure, ready to move to the next stage.

Reincorporation. Catching our breath and drinking water like horses returning from a long trek, we stagger toward the house. A potluck meal is ready for everyone. Seated at the table, I notice that we feel much more connected to one another. Like a family that has been through tough times together, we now feel bonded. While this communitas wafts throughout the atmosphere like the smell of fresh coffee, I realize that I have just had a powerful encounter of Christian community. I have also just experienced a deep and personal touch with God concerning a "middle issue" that has been in the back of my mind for a long time.

Deep community.
Deep transformation.
I overhear the group discussion:

"I now feel stronger in my faith—God met me in the sweat lodge," one participant exclaims.

"I had my most intense encounter of Jesus in the sweat lodge," another affirms.

I know that I am not the only one who has deepened their discipleship as a result of the contextualized Native American ritual.

After the *Inipi* ritual on the Rosebud reservation each year, at least one seminary student would often explain that they'd had their most intense experience of Jesus there. For me, I experienced how the ritual process drives it deep into my bones what it means to be a follower of Jesus. This is not a cognitive experience alone; instead, the fully sensory experience provides a deep cleansing and renewal.

While symbols and rituals are two powerful genres available for discipleship, there are other genres as well. I will select one more to discuss in the Lakota Sicangu culture: dance.

We Dance Our Prayers

Richard (2002) explained that the Lakota Sicangu dance their prayers. This statement implies that dance is an important genre for discipleship since prayer with God is a basic aspect of focusing his life on Jesus. Henri Nowen (1975) describes how prayer develops an "inner sensitivity [that] is the beginning of a spiritual life" (p. 20). The genre of dance can easily be overlooked unless someone recognizes the discipleship potential.

In Sioux Falls, SD, a hospital asked a Native American chief to dedicate the building before the opening. I was in the crowd watching the dedication. After a performance by several Native American dancers the chief brought with him, the chief proclaimed, "OK, this building has been dedicated, so you can now go in."

People in the circle around the dancers looked at each other, silently wondering, "Where was the prayer of dedication?"

The largely Anglo crowd enjoyed watching the dances, but they were still waiting for the "official dedication." What the crowd didn't realize was that every time the dancer touched his feet to the earth, he was consecrating and commissioning that space. The dancers were praying and dedicating the building, but their prayers were conducted via the dances. The genre of dance, then, can be very powerful for Richard to identify as fully Christian and fully Sicangu Lakota.

While we have been discussing Richard's discipleship journey in the Lakota Sicangu culture, Richard is not the only Christian has used oral arts for contextual expressions of discipleship. When I lived in Ghana, West Africa, with the Builsa people, I observed their use of other oral art genres for discipleship.

Builsa Culture in Ghana

The Builsa people live in Ghana, West Africa. From 1992 to 2001, my family and I lived among them. I was amazed at the use of various genres in this oral preference culture. I will share a few stories that indicate ways these genres are particularly suited for discipleship. Similar to Richard's experience with the oral arts, these indigenous genres could help the Builsa be identified as fully Christian and fully Builsa, as they addressed the various "middle issues" the people faced.

Proverbs: Wisdom of Many through the Wit of One

Adapted from Moon (2009). I noticed early on that Builsa proverbs were used almost every day, particularly in discussing important, weighty matters. They were also used for entertainment, to lighten a conversation. Could they also be well-suited for discipleship?

Seated with a group of Builsa church leaders one day, I asked if there was a particular proverb that really helped them in their discipleship journey. One church leader did not hesitate. He shouted out, "*Nurubiik a labri ka kpiak kawpta po*" ("A human being hides in the feathers of a chicken").

There was a dramatic pause with a very puzzling ending. I thought, "Really? What does a chicken have to do with Christianity?"

Sensing my confusion, he continued. "In the life of the Builsa people, fowls are used to hide shame because of problems. If someone has money troubles, they can sell some of the fowls at market and then use the money to solve the problem. If someone suffers from sickness, infertility, drought, or famine, the traditional Builsa culture directs the sacrifice of fowls to the ancestors or earth shrines. Growing up, I knew that we were always protected from shame as long as we had fowls, because we could always hide inside their feathers."

"They also help us initiate friendships," he continued. "If I want to start a friendship with someone, then I offer them a chicken for us to share a meal together, or I give him a chicken to take home."

"Now that I am a *Kristobiik* [Christian], I feel that *Yezu* [Jesus] is the chicken that I hide under. When problems come, I can run

to *Yezu* in prayer and ask him to cover my shame and protect me from evil. He will bear the full impact of the problem that has come upon me, and I can safely rest in His feathers."

Another Builsa Christian chimed in, "When we rest in the feathers of *Yezu*, then we no longer need to have charms, juju, or any other black medicine to protect us. The feathers of *Yezu* will cover us. Our relationship with him assures us that he will cover us with his wings. *Naawen Wani* [the Bible] says that *Naawen* [God] will 'cover you with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart' (Psalms 91:4)."

He continued, "This proverb has touched me deeply, and it helps me understand the heart of *Yezu*. When I hear this proverb and read Matthew 23:37, I can feel *Yezu's* heart and desire for us Builsa people. *Yezu* says, 'How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings.' That is *Yezu's* desire for us—to protect us, cover our shame and receive the brunt of our difficulties. That is a closer friend than I have ever known!"

Yet another Builsa Christian added, "Do you remember how Ruth was a widow? Like our widows here, she had little hope for the future. When she placed herself under *Naawen's* feathers, *Naawen* brought about a wonderful blessing. Listen to the praise she received from Boaz in Ruth 2:12: 'May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, *under whose wings you have come to take refuge.*'" (italics mine).

I was astounded at this chicken theology! The Builsa worldview can be characterized as a "fear/power" culture (Moon, 2012). I observed that the fear of witchcraft was often present at many public events. To address the middle issues related to fear, the Builsa church leaders found great strength in this indigenous proverb as it engaged the Bible. To make this even more powerful, another genre was used to expand upon the proverb: story.

Stories: Portray it, don't say it

Stories have a way of shaping reality and clarifying abstract concepts. The lively conversation around chicken theology continued with a recounting of the following story:

A man rested his hoe against his shoulder as he walked toward his bush farm to prepare the ground for planting. When he returned home that night, his heart sank as he saw only the scorched remains of his house. He forgot his weary arms and legs as he sprinted to his home, heart pounding.

The earth, his hut, and his animals were covered in black embers. Everything had been destroyed by a bush fire that got out of control.

Angered over his loss, he kicked the black scorched body of a lifeless chicken that lay amidst the ground. He screamed and raised his fists in the air to try and stop the all-consuming panic. As he sat in the deathly stillness, he heard a faint sound.

He stopped.

Bending over, he picked up the dead chicken to find live chicks under her limp wings. Evidently, the mother hen saw the approaching fire and gathered the chicks under her wings. Sitting on top of the chicks, the fire burned the mother hen while the chicks remained safe. And that's what it means for Christians to hide under the feathers of Jesus. He takes the fire as we remain protected and safe.

This story further explained the meaning of the proverb in a way that was so vivid and concrete that it was easy to remember—in fact, it was impossible to forget. Months later, I would draw upon this chicken theology to help me address my own fears. To aid in this process, I will discuss one more genre for discipleship: songs.

Songs: We become what we hum

I did not translate any English songs into the local language of Buli for worship in church; instead, I listened to the songs that local Christians composed to describe their faith experience, such as the following:

Wa [Yezu] chawgsi mu, Wa chawgsi mu, Wa chawgis mu.

Wa chawgsi mu, Wa sum jam chawgsi.

Wa chawgsi mu, Satana yaa de mu,

Wa chawgsi mu, Wa sum jam chawgsi.

He [Jesus] wraps me tightly, He wraps me tightly, He wraps me tightly.

He wraps me tightly, He really does wrap me tightly.

He wraps me tightly, Satan wants to destroy me,

He wraps me tightly, He really does wrap me tightly.

This song's theme is similar to that of the proverb and story: amidst the cultural issues that bring fear, Christians can be wrapped tightly in the arms of Jesus in order to receive protection.

Months later, I remembered this lesson as the harvest time approached. Seated in my house, I heard a sound from far away.

Waaaaa-hoo.

Gradually, the sound increased in volume as people from neighboring houses used this call to drive away a *sakpak* [witch] that was said to wander in the high millet.

"WAAAAA-HOO!" the shout came from my close neighbors as they provided the traditional response to shout and push the *sakpak* away from their house.

Fear slowly creeped in and was now at my doorstep. I was reminded of this song, along with the proverb "Humans hide under the feathers of a chicken," and the story of the hen covering her chicks amidst the fire. I began to sing the song,

He [Jesus] wraps me tightly, He wraps me tightly, He wraps me tightly.

He wraps me tightly, He really does wrap me tightly.

He wraps me tightly, Satan wants to destroy me,

He wraps me tightly, He really does wrap me tightly.

As I continued to sing, my faith strengthened and the fear subsided. Instead of shouting, "Waaaa-hoo," I hid under the feathers of

Jesus as a powerful response to this serious spiritual issue. The proverb, story, and song combined for effective discipleship.

This helped me appreciate the middle issues and concerns that Christians in the Builsa culture have to address on a regular basis. Using various oral arts from their culture, they are able to engage Scripture with culture for discipleship. They show us how to use the oral arts on a regular basis and not limit them to a liturgical setting.

Conclusion

The oral arts are particularly well-suited for discipleship. Through proper contextualization, various genres provide critical responses to help Christians engage the middle issues that are often the focus of discipleship. Whether you are caught in fear when you hear the sound of a spirit force coming your way or you need to overcome some addiction, these genres are available to help Christians engage these issues in order to remain focused on Christ.

A story is told (Moon, 2017) about a young girl in an African village who longed for the day she could see hippos. She heard the tales about the big hippos who would swim up the river near her hut and wrestle each other. She wanted to see this with her own eyes. Finally, the day she longed for arrived. Somebody shouted, "The hippos are down by the river!" She moved her legs as fast as they could carry her to the river. She looked to the left and then to the right, but she did not see any hippos. Her excitement soured to disappointment. Finally, she stepped out on a rock to get a closer look but to no avail. She lowered her head and slowly trekked home. Noticing her downcast countenance, her mom asked what happened.

"I was so excited to see the hippos that I searched up and down the river. I even stepped out on a rock to get a better view, but I could not find them," the girl explained.

The mom replied, "Wait—there are no rocks at that spot on the river. That was the

hippo! The hippo was right under your feet and you didn't know it."

Like this girl, people looking for better ways to promote transformative discipleship often miss the potential of the oral arts. The indigenous oral arts are right under our feet, embedded in the local culture. But disciple makers often do not understand their potent value for addressing middle issues. Recognizing and using these genres for a Sunday worship experience is an excellent start. For the Monday through Saturday life experience, though, these genres are right under our feet to help us engage the spirit world for healthy contextual discipleship. Why not recognize them and apply them for life-transforming discipleship?

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The Iron Law of Communication

Wayne Dye

Abstract: Miscommunication is a common problem in human interaction; tragically, sometimes even the Gospel is misunderstood. The root cause of most interpersonal misunderstandings is not failure to hear words that are said but differences in the cognitive environments of the speaker and hearer. Their cognitive environments are made up of their language, culture, personal histories, and their evaluation of the immediate situation between speaker and hearer. How this happens is made clear through an example of miscommunication between two people with broadly the same background. The problem is ubiquitous; without exception, every conversation depends on an adequate match between the cognitive environments of speakers and hearers. The problem can be overcome by a combination of learning about the cognitive environment of the hearer before a conversation, two-way communication, and thoughtful listening to the hearer's responses. It also requires building on common human experiences. Because the process of learning from stories is built on common human experiences, stories are a significant way to overcome the problem of the iron law of communication.

Keywords: communication, Gospel, hearer, misunderstanding
Orality reliance level: Very low orality reliance ■□□□□

The call came as a surprise. Someone expanding his teaching ministry to East Africa wanted to learn from my experiences there and my insights as a Christian anthropologist. He lived a long way from my home in Dallas, but he was coming to the airport and could meet me there for an hour or so. Knowing that this airport had no lounges open to the general public, I suggested we meet at a certain restaurant about a mile from there. I waited at the restaurant for an hour before he found my table, at which point I learned that there were actually two restaurants in the same chain near the airport. He had gone to one, and I had gone to the other.

How many times have things like this happened to you? How often do you misinterpret what your spouse or a close friend is trying to say? If we are so prone to miscommunication with those we know well, it is not surprising that there is more miscommunication with those who are very different from us.

At least since the time of Aristotle, specialists have studied the process by which ideas are communicated. There are several models of the process, and they have become increasingly complex as additional relevant factors have been explored. All are basically similar. However, together, they provide a well-established picture of how communication works. In this article, I will explain some key insights based on that information, which have helped me to communicate better. I am especially indebted to Prof. Charles Kraft (1980), who was writing some of the most useful explanations and Christian applications of communication theory.

An example of unexpected communication failure

I begin with a story that sums up a number of real conversations between Christians and modern Japanese people. Although it is fictional, it summarizes insights explained to me by Steve Headland, who had learned them through many witnessing experiences. Arisu and her parents have been Japanese immigrants in California since she was eight. Her parents became believers two years after they arrived, and Arisu followed a year after that. All of them regularly attend an evangelical church. They still speak Japanese at home, but Arisu understands the world like a young American Christian adult. Arisu

is a university student now and is excited to get to know a fellow Japanese student, Chieko.

Chieko is new to America. She had come to the US to attend the same university. She had been relieved to discover someone who spoke Japanese and could introduce her to this strange country. Arisu decides to invite Chieko to their Japanese-American church. Afterward, they sit together in a popular restaurant. Speaking Japanese to be more welcoming, Arisu says, "The good news is this: Although you are a sinner, God loves you, and He wants to forgive your sins, and so I want you to come to our church service and hear our pastor explain how to have your sins forgiven."

Chieko HEARS her say, "The happy sound is this. Because you are a criminal, a fairy wants to have a romance with you, and so I want you to come to a teaching meeting on Sunday and hear a ranch teacher tell how your crimes can be allowed."

How could such a simple communication go so far astray? Both of them were born in the same country and are now students at the same university. To explain this, we must go deeper into how all communication events take place. Bear with me, please; this section might seem tedious, but it shows how misunderstandings occur and how to avoid them.

Arisu has an idea she wants to communicate, one that she believes would be valuable for her new friend. However, she cannot communicate her thoughts telepathically, so she chooses to use the language, words, and gestures that she thinks will communicate them. In communication terms, together, they form a message. To choose that message, Arisu must rely on all she understands about many aspects of life. This includes what she understands about languages and cultures as well as knowledge from her own life experiences and what she understands about the immediate context. In communication theory, those four categories, language,

cultural knowledge, personal knowledge, and immediate context, taken together are her "cognitive environment." Without much conscious thought, Arisu uses her cognitive environment to design and express what she tells Chieko.

Chieko pays attention to her new friend because she wants to understand what Arisu is saying to her. In communication terms, she is deriving a certain meaning from this message. Chieko also has a cognitive environment to build on, comprised of the same four categories. However, the content of Chieko's cognitive environment has no Christian elements; instead, it has elements common to Japanese culture, which she unconsciously assumes Arisu still shares, especially since they are speaking in Japanese. Interpreting her friend's words in terms of their meaning in her mental world, Chieko hears "good news" as "happy sound," "God" as some unknown other-worldly being, most likely a fairy because he wants a relationship, and "loves you" as "wants to have a romantic relationship with you." Finally, "forgiven" more commonly means "allowed" in Japanese worldview, and "sins" are only commonly talked about when they are crimes, so "sins can be forgiven" becomes "crimes can be allowed."

The Iron Law of Communication

A shared language, a partly shared culture, and the common experience of being students in the same university were not enough for Chieko to get Arisu's intended meaning. Unfortunately, this kind of misunderstanding happens frequently. Hearers frequently have some difference or differences in their cognitive environment from speakers. Unless corrected, the result is misunderstood messages. It happens every day because no one can say anything without depending on their own cognitive environment. Conversely, no one can understand any message without also depending on their own cognitive environment. I am calling this the "**iron law of communication**" because no one anywhere escapes it. It is like

gravity. People have developed equipment that allows them to fly, but no one who stays on Earth ever escapes gravity. In the same way, every time one human being communicates with another in any way, this law of communication is at work. This law provides a challenge for Christian communicators of all kinds.

My wife and I were once Bible translators in a tiny remote language group in Papua New Guinea. They had never once heard the Gospel, so we were eager to tell them about our amazing Jesus. When we told them Jesus had actually risen from the dead, they responded, "Oh yes, that happens sometimes here, too." It turned out that they believed someone in a coma was dead, so when an individual revived after being in a coma, usually from falciparum malaria, they believed he had risen from the dead.

Later, when we were learning to witness in India, we suggested saying that Jesus is unique because he is God incarnate. However, Hinduism can include the belief that an outstanding holy man is God incarnate. There are always a few of these in various places in India at any one time. Christian witnesses to Hindus have to point to other proofs of the uniqueness of Jesus.

I would not recommend witnessing to a Southeast Asian Buddhist by quoting from John 3:16. To many of them; it is saying that God is really so ungodlike as to have a strong emotional attachment to humans when "everyone knows" that a big part of holiness is serenity and a lack of strong emotion. Worse, John 3:16 says that because of this love, God sacrificed his own son. For a Buddhist, killing anyone is bad, and killing one's own son is just horrible. Then, it indicates that God did this so that we humans could never reach nirvana but must forever continue in an endless cycle of reincarnation. Who wants to hear "good news" that sounds like that?

> NO ONE CAN UNDERSTAND ANY MESSAGE WITHOUT ALSO DEPENDING ON THEIR OWN COGNITIVE ENVIRONMENT

There are many such communication challenges throughout the world.

Christianity itself provides another inherent challenge: **Coming to Christ and following Him requires a level of understanding of Christian teaching.** This could be called the "iron law of Christian discipling." Together, these two laws provide a great challenge for Christian communication. How can this challenge be overcome? I suggest a combination of three methods:

1. Before witnessing to someone from another culture, a speaker needs to **learn as much as possible** about the life experiences, culture, and worldview of his potential hearers. The more they can find out about their hearers, the better they can guess their hearers' cognitive environments. That information is crucial for effective communication.
2. Fortunately, some of that knowledge can unfold during the course of a conversation. For any hope that this will happen, **conversations must be two-way**; we need to hear more than we speak. That is why it is so important to listen carefully and ask questions in a conversation. Two-way communication is the best way to find out what is being understood by the other person.

In our story, Arisu could have found out enough in the conversation to know that Chieko still had a Japanese understanding of the cosmos and God, and that might have led her to say something like this, "There is a creator of the universe, God, who is all-powerful. He is perfect. He wants to have you as a friend, but being friends is hindered by your failure to live uprightly. So, I want you to come to a teaching meeting on Sunday, during which you are going to hear our group teacher tell us how God can restore your relationship with him." That would have been

a better start, but there is even more Arisu could do. She could tell stories.

3. **Build on common life experiences.** The way God made humanity, there is also a third "iron law" that is a huge help in any conversation, and story-telling inherently builds on it. The third law is this, "**All human beings have some common experiences.**" All people need to eat and sleep. All people can only live within a narrow temperature range. All people need protection from injuries and disease. In addition to such physical characteristics, everyone has many emotions. All humans live with others or long to do so, and all have drives for survival, safety, sex, and other things. These common human experiences result in some commonality in the cognitive environments of every person.

Importantly, every human learns to make sense of life while growing up by observing or hearing about the experiences of others. In other words, they learn from stories. Stories are how humans learn to interpret life, and people in every culture can at least partially understand them. Stories provide a huge advantage for making Christian teaching clear. Of course, stories can be misunderstood, too. Hence, cultural research before and while telling them, especially getting feedback from hearers, remains critical. However, stories normally require less adjustment and are clearer and more meaningful than other ways of getting across the same ideas. I believe this might be why Jesus told so many stories, and the Bible is full of stories. It is easier to teach spiritual truth through stories than through any other means.

In summary,

- Becoming and growing as a follower of Jesus requires understanding the content of our faith.
- Really communicating requires the speaker and hearer to interpret the same words and actions similarly. Since both of them can only build on their own "cognitive environments" (languages, cultural knowledge, personal knowledge, and immediate context), they must understand enough about each other to do that.
- It is possible and valuable to learn as much as possible about others before telling them anything important.
- Much can be learned during a conversation, provided it is genuinely two-way communication.
- Universal human experience helps immensely in enabling communication.

Storytelling is the best way to communicate, but remembering these universal basic principles can make stories even more effective.

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The Use of Narrative in Paul's Letter to the Romans

Joshua Adebayo Adesina, Jong Angeles & Danyal Qalb

Abstract: This paper explores the use of Narrative in Paul's letter to the Romans, specifically focusing on its application across diverse cultures. Biblical narratives are foundational elements for developing systematic theology and other theological reflections. These narratives unfold various characters, leading to a deeper understanding of a particular theology. For instance, Paul employs narratives from the Old Testament, such as those of Abraham and David, in his epistle to the Romans to explain his teachings on righteousness, allowing his recipients to understand his argument better. In the same way, this concept enables the incorporation of cultural narratives, facilitating a more meaningful discussion of theological concepts. This narrative approach enriches theological reflection and promotes deeper engagement with scripture among diverse cultural and educational backgrounds.

Cashew nuts are delicious, and many people love them. They are expensive and often exported. People who buy and eat cashew nuts often do not know how they grow and that they are technically just the seed of the cashew fruit, not nuts. This fruit, known as the cashew apple, is sweet and delicious but cannot be found in supermarkets because they must ripen on the tree and go bad quickly. It also explains the low yield and high costs of cashews. The tree must produce a peach-sized fruit, and often, people consume only the tiny seed.

Cashew fruits

Systematic theology is like a cashew. It is the seed. It is truth neatly packed into propositional statements. Yes, cashew nuts are enjoyed independently, but wouldn't it be nice to try the fruit? What is systematic theology without Biblical narrative? We will answer these questions with the example of the Book of Romans and explore Narrative Theology as a different way of approaching the Scriptures that favor oral learners.

Grand Narrative Emerges from Stories

Before diving into examples from the book of Romans, we will elaborate on the terms Grand Narrative, Narrative Theology, and Character Theology. They all relate to each other but are distinct from each other.

How We Get to a Grand Narrative

Grand Narrative describes the Bible's overarching story or the "big picture." However, the Bible does not reveal its Grand Narrative plainly; instead, it emerges from individual smaller stories of Biblical characters. We all should be able to agree that the Bible is a Book with many stories and characters. The

disagreement begins with its interpretation. Over two millennia, different people in diverse cultures developed various ways to interpret, AKA exegete, the Bible. Textual hermeneutics, historical context, oral hermeneutics (Dewey, 1994; Kelber, 1983; Mburu, 2019), missional hermeneutics (Wright, 2023), performance criticism (Botha, 2013; Perry, 2019; Rhoads, 2006b, 2006a; West, 2023), Spirit hermeneutics (Keener, 2016) and ethnohermeneutics (Caldwell, 2019) are just a small sample of different exegetical approaches to the Bible. Each interpretation method will lead to an overall understanding of the Bible, the Grand Narrative. For some, the Bible is just that, a storybook. Others may see it as fictional literature, while another group interprets the Bible as universal truth. For the sake of this paper, we will focus on the people who interpret the Bible as God's universal truth. Some notable Grand Narratives include Wright (2018, 2023), who centers on God's **redemption** plan, culminating in the eschatological hope of a new creation. Ott, Strauss, and Ott et al. (2010) highlight God's plan for the **nations** across the Bible. Glasser and Engen (2003) underscore **God's kingdom** as a central theme. Sunquist (2017) explores the intertwining of **suffering and glory**, illustrating how God calls His church through history, theology, and culture. Based on an understanding of the Grand Narrative, different theologies like liberation theology (Sunquist, 2015, pp. 57–62), Chinese theology (pp. 52–53), theology for African women (pp. 43–45) with theology for African women, character theology (Steffen, 2022), historical theology, local theologies (Bazzell & Peñamora, 2016), and systematic theologies emerge. Figure 1 depicts how the interpretation of Biblical stories leads to a Grand Narrative that is the basis for various theologies.

Let us introduce oral learners into the discussion and refer to them as High Orality Reliant (HOR) learners, contrasting them with Low Orality Reliant (LOR) individuals. While this might seem like a dichotomy, it functions more as a spectrum. On the HOR end,
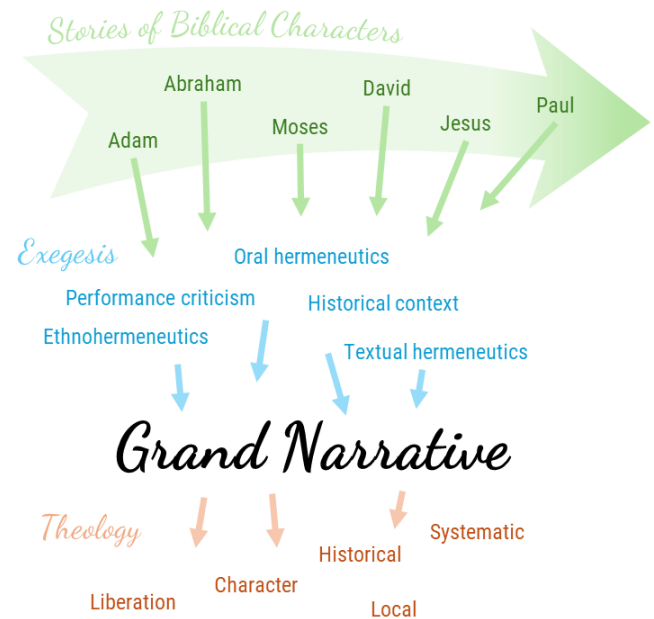
Figure 1: Grand Narrative emerging from Stories of Biblical characters

people tend to think more holistically in narratives and learn best from interpersonal interactions. On the LOR end, individuals rely more on written text to learn, engage in abstract conceptual thinking, and focus on details (Institutes for Orality Strategies, 2024; Madinger, 2022; Thigpen, 2020). HOR cultures learn progressive moving from the general to the specific (Shaw, 2021, p. 50), from what they already know to new knowledge (Mburu, 2019, p. 7) from "whole to part" (Steffen, 2009, p. 109) while emphasizing the broader context and not the details because (Enns, 2005, pp. 76–79) "learning the parts occurs later during learning" (Bird & Dale, 2022, p. 274). In contrast, Western theologians emphasize the details of specific verses or concepts (Steffen, 2020). This way of thinking quickly disconnects LOR theologians from the stories and the Grand Narrative as they favor approaching the Bible with textual hermeneutics and systematic theology.

Let us go back to the cashew analogy. LOR theologies love the cashew nuts and forget or are unaware of the fruit. Still, all theology builds on some version of the Grand Narrative, intentional or not, even if some theologians relegate stories only appropriate for

Sunday school. Still, at some point, every theology returns to the Biblical stories. No cashew nut can exist without the cashew fruit.

What is Narrative Theology?

"The Christian faith rests not upon universal reason or human self-consciousness but is sustained through and as a commitment to a story" (Loughlin, 1999, p. 33). This Christian faith is derived from the Old and New Testament stories, which are appropriated in one's own story (Cone, 1997) or portrayed in the everyday events of our present lives (Goldberg, 2001, pp. 244–245). An excellent example of reflecting on Scripture is the story of the Jewish exodus into the wilderness towards the promised land of Canaan (Ex. 13:17-17:16). This narrative gives convictions to some Christians to reflect on their own story of a challenging journey, patience, perseverance and sense of trust amongst others. In other words, these biblical narratives make sense to a specific part of our lives as we connect to that particular story and allow it to guide one's journey. Goldberg describes this narrative as the source of intelligibility and significance in theological reflection (p. 152), meaning that narratives are behind religious or theological reflections. Narratives, as portrayed in the Scripture, allow a religious community to form their moral values and sustain their faithful walk of faith with Jesus Christ. Hauerwas and Jones (1989) write:

> Through our participation in such a community, the narratives also function to give shape to our moral characters, which in turn deeply affect the way we interpret and construe the world and events and thus affect what we determine to be appropriate action as members of the community. (pp. 2–3)

Thus, the narrative gives the community of believers their identity, founded in God's revelation through narrative (Callahan, 2001).

Oral learners prefer to hear stories that speak to them directly without any propositions. Jesus' way of communicating God's word to the oral culture of the biblical times is the best example we can give and worthy to follow. He shares a story that stimulates people's imagination and invites them to be a part of that story (Frei et al., 1992). It is very relevant in the present day. Hiebert muses, "Oral people can be taught to think in abstract concepts, but they still prefer to think of things in concrete contexts, not in terms of abstract intrinsic categories" (Hiebert, 2008, p. 156). It makes sense to them compared to abstract systematic theology, which is like "pulling threads out of weaving" (Steffen, 2020, p. 42). "Stories draw listeners into the lives of the characters whether they are real or fictitious. Listeners not only hear what happens to such characters, through their imagination, they vicariously participate in the experience" (2005, p. 31).

However, theological reflections started in the Global North, particularly in England and Germany (Abernethy, 1989, p. 1). Western Christians highlight fragments and not on the metanarratives, which Steffen (2020) describes as "people of the New Testament who feast on parts" (p. 37) rather than being "people of the Book" (p. 37). This method may be more dangerous as it may result in missing the big picture, which leads to a loss of the meaning of the Scripture and eventually leads to an increase in misinformed interpretations (p. 39).

In summary, narrative theology is the realistic presentation of God, particularly Jesus Christ, from the biblical story context to everyday life (Fackre, 1983, p. 343; Frei et al., 1992). It communicates who God is, his character, his infinite capacity, and how he deals with his creation. Moreover, those stories laid down in most genres of Scripture must be interpreted within the narratives and characters of a particular story (Goodson, 2015, p. 3). Appropriately, those specific narratives become our own and guide every believer's journey with God. These narratives exist in every culture's traditional local story, folk tales, legends, or proverbs. These

are considerably and relevantly useful in engaging God's word with the people.

Narrative Theology is Based on Characters

As we continue to unravel the Grand Narrative of the Bible, it is expedient to understand each character's role. These roles "correspond to the nature of humanity," they are among the interpretative clues in internalizing the Bible's grand narrative (Arthurs, 2007, p. 67).   Characters are vital elements of the Bible's grand narrative. They drive the plot forward and embody theological concepts within the narrative, enabling a deeper understanding of faith and doctrine.

Characters are not mere entities within a story; their actions, choices, and interactions contribute to the unfolding narrative, providing a dynamic and engaging means to convey theological ideas. In the Bible narrative, characters could be protagonists, antagonists, or foils, similar to actors in a drama (Boerden & Mathewson, 2005, p. 274; Mathewson, 2005, p. 268). This perspective acknowledges that the characters are integral to the theological exploration, making the narrative a living and evolving expression of faith. Through their experiences, struggles, and triumphs, characters become living metaphors for abstract theological ideas. This embodiment allows individuals to connect with and understand these concepts personally and emotionally, fostering a deeper and more relatable comprehension of faith and doctrine (Boerden & Mathewson, 2005, p. 274; Steffen, 2020, pp. 42–43).

Characters are significant in narrative theology and the Grand Narrative of Scripture. Each character, which numbers more than 2,900, "makes it easy for us to identify with their choices, the resulting consequences, the implications they have for abstract doctrines, and the role they play in delineating the grand narrative of the Scripture story" (Eslinger, 2002, p. 64; Steffen, 2020, p. 44). Characters provide a vast source from which

the complete and correct picture of God's face is drawn.

Narrative Theology in the Book of Romans

Having elaborated on the Grand Narrative, Narrative Theology, and Characters, we will now turn our attention to Paul. We will specifically focus on how he used Old Testament characters as the foundation for a Theology that integrated the church in Rome into God's Grand Narrative. How did Paul include the chuck of Rome in the Grand Narrative of Scripture?

The Grand Narrative in the Book of Romans

To understand how the Roman church fits into God's Grand Narrative, we must look at the narrative of the Roman church. The story of the church intertwines with the Greco-Roman and Jewish narratives.

Rome was the center of the Roman empire. The Roman law, which replaced the Greek law, represented a subsequent development and was characterized by its supremacy over the lawmaker, not subject to questioning (Müller, 2000, pp. 27–28). Paul's use of language associated with law can be seen as contextualizing the message for his Roman audience (p. 33). "Greco-Roman antiquity was limited both in the ways it was used and in the percentage of the population who were literate. People lived in an oral culture" (Dewey, 1994, p. 37). Even within this culture that emphasizes the law, Paul predominantly employed honor-shame-based vocabulary in the first three chapters of Romans, which is more closely related to oral learners' way of thinking (Armstrong & Mischke, n.d., 0:15:35). In general, the Bible uses more honor-shame-based vocabulary than guilt-based-vocabulary (Steffen, 2005, p. 425). In explaining Paul's perspective on the law from an oral standpoint, Kelber (1983) referenced Rom. 7, where Paul establishes a connection between the cognitive aspect of the Law and its association with sin and death. Using language tied to seeing and

knowing under the written Law's authority, Paul employs vision as a predominant metaphor to convey an understanding of one's own shortcomings through self-reflection (pp. 159–164).

The Greco-Roman milieu was unfamiliar with the LXX, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, but Jews, proselytes, and God-fearing individuals—those attracted to Judaism yet not fully committed through circumcision—were likely in Paul's mind as he extensively cited the Scriptures (Dunn, 1988, p. l). Many Jews lived in Rome, many, like Paul (Ac. 16:37-38), being Roman citizens (p. xlvi). We can assume that the church in Rome started among Jews and people close to Judaism who returned to Rome after hearing Peter's message on Pentecost in Jerusalem (Ac. 2:10-11). It is not far-fetched to assume that Romans, at least initially, did not distinguish between Jews and Christians, as most followers of Jesus came from the Jewish community (Moo, 1996, p. 5). It was Israel's self-understanding that they were people chosen and saved by grace and that the law was given to regulate their relationship with God (Dunn, 1988, p. lxv–lxvi).

The church in Rome originated within the Jewish community and shared many similarities. The disagreements between these groups centered around Jesus (Moo, 1996, p. 4). Amidst the Jewish and Greco-Roman narratives, Paul addresses the church. Unlike in other letters, Paul does not refer to them as a church. Instead, he closely assimilated the followers of Jesus with Jews as Romans started to be suspicious of Christians (Dunn, 1988, p. lii).

By employing the law, Paul engages with the Greco-Roman narrative. Through the story of Abraham, he reasserts the Jewish narrative as God's chosen people by grace. Paul integrates the Roman church into God's
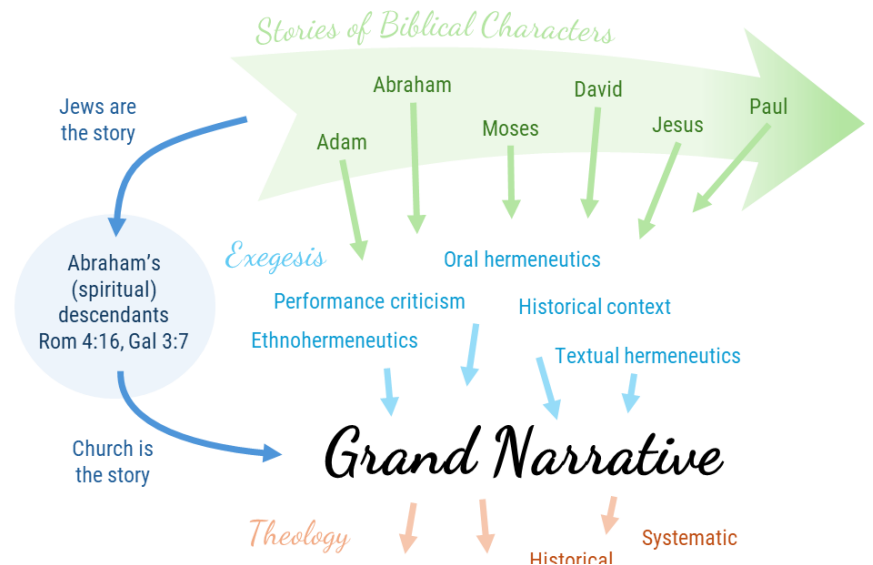

Figure 2: Paul includes the church in the Grand Narrative

Grand Narrative, presenting them as spiritual descendants of Abraham (Rom. 4:16-18), as illustrated in Figure 2. Paul further emphasizes this affirmation by referencing other Old Testament passages highlighting the nations worshiping God (Rom. 15:9-12). A similar pattern emerges later when Paul is in Rome, teaching Jews from the Scriptures and ensuring the mention of the nations as part of the Grand Narrative (Ac. 28:17-31).

Character theology relies on earthy, concrete characters to frame abstract truths and concepts, thereby giving ideas a home. It does so even as it retains God as the center of the story, and the individual story's place within the broader sweep of Scripture. (Steffen, 2018, p. 211)

Instead of jumping straight to concepts like salvation, sanctification, or glorification, Paul used familiar stories of Old Testament Characters to showcase these truths (Witherington, 2014). Western commentaries often delve directly into concepts and gloss over the stories. Alternatively, expressed with the cashew analogy: we are so used to eating the seed that we do not even consider the cashew fruit anymore. On the other hand, just like oral learners, Paul engages the audience with stories. Characters connect us to

abstract concepts, and practical applications naturally emerge from their narratives. After dedicating 11 chapters, most of the letter, to narratives, Paul introduces the expected response of the church with Rom. 12:1-2, bridging from characters to the "necessary response," the application for the church (Hartt, 1989, p. 291).

Paul's Use of Biblical Characters in the Book of Romans

One of the distinctive features of Paul's letter to the Romans is his use of Old Testament characters as examples, illustrations, and arguments for his theological message. Paul does not merely cite the Old Testament texts but interprets them in light of Christ and applies them to his audience. In this way, Paul shows how Old Testament characters are relevant to the Christian faith and practice. Some Old Testament characters Paul uses are Abraham, David, Adam, Moses, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Pharaoh, Elijah, and Isaiah. Paul uses these characters to convey key theological concepts such as justification by faith, grace, sin, law, election, salvation history, and God's sovereignty. Using these characters, Paul connects his gospel with the story of Israel and demonstrates its continuity and fulfillment in Christ. Paul also challenges his readers to learn from the examples of these characters, both positive and negative, and to imitate their faith and obedience.

One such character is Abraham, "the father of the Jewish nation" (Wiersbe, 2008, p. 38). Paul uses Abraham as the model of justification by faith, the central theme of Romans. Wiersbe (2008) asserts that justification is an act, not a process because no person's justification is higher than another. Moreover, we do not grow in justification to a higher degree (p. 34). Paul argues that Abraham's justification was not by works or circumcision but by believing God's promise (Rom. 4:1-12). Paul also shows that Abraham's faith was not based on human strength or sight but on God's power and promise (Rom. 4:13-25). Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness, and he became the father of all who believe (Rom. 4:16-24) (Dunn, 1988, p. lix; Pate, 2013, p. 92; Wiersbe, 2008, pp. 38–42; Worley, 2016).

Adam is a character symbolizing humanity. Paul uses Adam to represent humanity's fall into sin and death. This fall is called a "universal ruin" (Harrison & Hagner, 2011). In Rom. 5, Paul contrasts Adam and Christ as two heads of humanity whose actions have universal consequences. Through Adam's disobedience, sin and death entered the world and spread to all people (Rom. 5:12-14). Grace and life came to those who received Christ's gift through His obedience (Rom. 5:15-21). Adam's sin brought condemnation, but Christ's righteousness brought justification (Rom. 5:16-19). God's righteousness is the saving power of God, but it must be received through faith in Jesus – the Son of God, who gave himself for the sins of the world (2011).

Paul illustrates the blessedness of forgiveness by using David as an example. In Rom. 4, Paul quotes Ps. 32:1-2, where David praises God for forgiving his sins and not counting them against him (Rom. 4:6-8). Paul applies this to his argument that justification is by faith apart from works and is available to Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 4:9-12) (Dunson, 2011).

Furthermore, Paul also uses Isaac and Ishmael as symbols of God's sovereign choice. In Rom. 9, Paul explains that God does not base his election on physical descent or human effort but on his purpose and mercy (Rom. 9:6-13). Paul cites Gen. 21:12, where God tells Abraham that his offspring will be reckoned through Isaac, not Ishmael (Rom. 9:7). Paul also cites Mal. 1:2-3, where God says he loved Jacob but hated Esau, even before they were born or did anything good or bad (Rom. 9:10-13).

Moreover, Paul also uses Jacob and Esau as examples of God's election. Paul argues that God can choose and show mercy or harden whom he wills (Rom. 9:14-18). Paul

appeals to Ex. 33:19, where God says he will have mercy with whom he has mercy and compassion with whom he has compassion (Rom 9:15). Paul also appeals to Ex. 9:16, where God says he raised Pharaoh for his glory, and to show his power in him (Rom. 9:17). Elijah also represented God's remnant. Paul addresses the question of Israel's rejection of the gospel and God's faithfulness to his promises (Rom. 11:1-10). Paul cites 1 Ki. 19:10-18, where Elijah complains that he is the only faithful one left in Israel, but God tells him that he has reserved seven thousand who have not bowed to Baal (Rom. 11:2-4). Paul applies this to his situation, where a remnant of Israel has accepted the gospel by grace, not by works (Rom. 11:5-6).

In addition to the characters mentioned above is Moses, who represented the law's role in God's plan. In Rom. 7 and 8, Paul discusses the relationship between the law and sin, death, and the Spirit. Paul affirms that the law is holy, righteous, and good but cannot save or sanctify anyone (Rom. 7:7-25). The law does not replace God's grace but reveals humanity's need for the grace of God. It exposes the sin of the sinful man (Pate, 2013, p. 299; Wiersbe, 2008, p. 52). Paul also contrasts the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus with the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:1-4) (Lesse, 2014). Paul cites Deu. 30:11-14, where Moses tells Israel that the commandment is not too hard or far away, but near them in their mouth and heart (Rom. 10:5-8).

Exegesis of Romans 4.1-12 Exemplifying Narrative Theology

Addressing a primarily Jewish audience or closely associated with Judaism, Paul incorporated narratives of Abraham, David, Moses, and others familiar to his readers in the letter to the Romans. We will now turn our attention to Rom. 4 and explore how Paul uses the story of Abraham to convey *dikaiosynē* (righteousness). A concept that refers to the forgiveness of sins and justification before God (Rom. 4:6-8, 24-25), which was Paul's main point in Rom. 3. It also refers to

God's righteousness as identified with the faithfulness of Jesus Christ as well as human righteousness that is obtained from God's saving activity "on behalf of his people and indeed on behalf of this world" (Witherington, 2004, p. 818).

In Rom. 4, Paul emphasizes the calling of Abraham, whom God regarded righteously based on his faith. His trusting belief made him righteous and did not necessarily mean God was paying back his work. God is giving favor to Abraham. It is centered on his will and not on Abraham's works. Has it something to do with the Gentiles as his recipient of the Roman epistle? Abraham's narrative, depicting him as a former pagan and the first proselyte to Judaism, likely connects the Gentile audience to Paul's emphasis on righteousness with God (Keener, 1993, p. 421). In addition, Gentiles would understand that the law was only for Israel, not for the Gentiles. However, the covenant of salvation is not tied to Israel only but is available to everyone (Moo, 2002, pp. 398–405).

According to Keener (1993), Rabbis often considered Abraham's faithfulness one of his works (p. 422). Dunn (1988), on the contrary, argues that Jews believe in saving grace (cf. Moo, 2002, pp. 398–399). The belief that Judaism embraces work-righteousness parallels an old belief in the sixteenth century of Martin Luther's reformation against the Catholics (Byrne, 2001, p. 227). Generally, Jews believe that undergoing circumcision is a sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:11). This becomes the precedent to the Jewish community that follows Judaism. However, Paul emphasizes to the Romans that Abraham was declared righteous even before he was circumcised (Rom 4:10) as he elucidates Gen. 15:6. In Rom. 4:11, Paul highlights: "And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (*The Holy Bible*, 2011). Abraham must have been declared righteous between thirteen and twenty-four years before his circumcision (Zondervan & Watson, 2015, p. 70). Furthermore, the promise was not given by

keeping the law because the law was given through Moses many years after Abraham. His descendants were not even able to keep the law. They must have failed if keeping the law is required. In Rom. 3, Paul was clear that no one can keep the law.

Gentiles, on the other hand, do not need to be circumcised even after they put their faith in God and embrace his grace. Paul also emphasized to the Galatians that circumcision has no value in Jesus (Gal. 5:2). However, they had to be circumcised to be a part of Judaism (Keener, 1993, p. 422). Paul proclaims that a person can only receive righteousness or salvation from God through humble faith (Moo, 2002, p. 377).

As Paul explicates his message to the Romans through the narrative of Abraham, he connects it with David's circumstances, where God is the one who gives forgiveness to those who sinned against him and not because of the people's good works. Paul is now bringing the narrative of David through Ps. 32:1-2. This part of Paul's interpretation uses the Jewish "gezerah shawah," which connects different parts of the Scripture with the same keywords or phrases (Keener, 1993, p. 422). Paul used this interpretation to elaborate his point with another narrative by inserting part of a psalm for better processing and then continuing with the same story of Abraham's unweakened faith until he was old and Sarah's womb dead (Rom. 4:19).

Paul's main message in Rom. 3, particularly highlighted in Rom. 3:22, says: "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (*The Holy Bible*, 2011) was elucidated by Paul through a Grand Narrative from the Old Testament. The Grand Narrative and insertion of a song explain it all for Jewish and Gentile believers

of Rome to understand. As mentioned above, Paul engages his readers with familiar stories. He highlights the characters of the Old Testament to describe certain truths (Witherington, 2014). This brief example from Rom. 4 gives narratology a vital and significant role in presenting the Scripture the way people would receive, process, memorize, and present information to other people of oral culture. It would be more relevant to our recipients if we use stories that are familiar to them along with local myths, folktales, proverbs, historical narratives or symbols, and other forms of art that will engage people for a deeper understanding of Scripture (Moon & Moreau, 2017, p. 135). Stories are oral forms that address people's worldview toward transformation, which is towards what Jesus commanded us to do (discipleship) (p. 136), as we will explore in the next chapter.
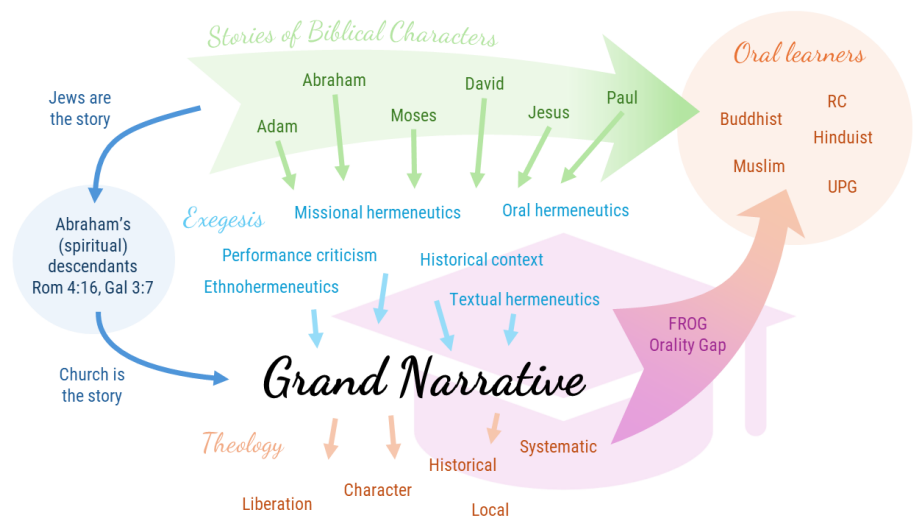

Figure 3: Including oral learners in the Grand Narrative

Narrative Theology Applied in Different Contexts

We demonstrated how Paul used narrative to connect with the church in Rome. Today, Western systematic theology is often taught through theoretical concepts, making it hard for oral learners to engage with it (Qalb, 2024), which can lead to syncretism (Angeles & Qalb, 2022). Returning to the cashew analogy, even though many people never tasted the fruit, they enjoyed the seed. A cashew tree cannot propagate without the

fruit. The fruit attracts animals, and they spread the seeds far and wide by eating it. Narratives are not optional but necessary for oral learners as stories do not just illustrate the point; they are the point in oral cultures (Steffen & Bjoraker, 2020, pp. 107–108). Figure 3 illustrates how teaching oral learners through theoretical concepts creates a disconnect between teaching methods and their preferred ways of learning (Madinger, 2017, pp. 55–56, 2022, pp. 51–52).

Figure 3

Including oral learners in the Grand Narrative

Before concluding, we will demonstrate how narrative theology can connect to oral learners in ways systematic theology fails to do. These are three examples from our respective contexts.

Muslim People in the Philippines

Oral learners need the cashew fruit before getting to the seed. In my 17 years working among a Muslim unreached people group, I realized that these people do not connect well with abstract concepts as typically used in our systematic theology. They also struggle with the logic utilized in our historical and textual hermeneutics. These teaching methods cause the Orality Gap (Madinger, 2017, pp. 55–56, 2022, pp. 51–52) and can easily lead to syncretism (Angeles & Qalb, 2022). A far more accessible way for these people to understand the Grand Narrative of God's Kingdom is to use stories. In my experience, chronological Bible storying connects well with their logic and faith as they are already familiar with many Old Testament prophets.

Telling these stories and discovering from the Bible together can open doors to invite them to enter God's Kingdom and become a part of the Grand Narrative. In the same manner, as Paul states, Gentiles who trust in Jesus are part of the Grand Narrative because they are spiritual descendants of Abraham (Rom. 4:16); we can invite Muslims to become part of God's story as well.

How can it be done practically? As Muslims follow their roots to Abraham, we can start with the story of his calling when God told Abraham that all nations should be blessed through Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Muslims trace their genealogy back to Ismael. However, today, most Muslims are not Arabs and, therefore, not physical descendants of Ismael. In Sura 37, the Qur'an describes how Abraham was challenged to sacrifice his son, who was "redeemed" by a "great sacrifice." Muslim tradition claims that this son was Ismael. However, the Qur'an only says "son," and only Isaac is mentioned in Sura 37, not Ismael. Using Gen. 22, striking to the narrative, and discovering God's Word together will continue to form the basis of a new Grand Narrative based on the Bible for our Muslim friends. When our chronological Bible study reaches Jesus, the Grand Narrative should reveal Him as the "great sacrifice."

I described some key stories that can explain the Grand Narrative of God's Kingdom to Muslims through Narrative Theology. Again, the cashew fruit is needed for the seed to form.

Food Tells a Story in Indonesia

God's Grand Narrative is embedded in the cultural stories of Indonesia. Just like the Book of Romans presents Paul's significant point using the stories of ancient Jewish history as a vital connection to his arguments, local stories can bring God's word to the people. They are more familiar with local stories that have been passed on from one generation to the next. Those stories can connect with God's stories, which Morgan (2002) describes as the work of the Spirit (p. 17). Javanese (and mostly Indonesians) celebrate events with a symbol of *tumpeng* even before the coming of Islam and Christianity (Angeles & Qalb, 2022, p. 53). This symbol has an interesting story that connects to their personal lives and answers the "why" the locals use it in most celebrations.

As captured in Photo 1, the tumpeng or cone-shaped rice is usually yellow as it is cooked with turmeric powder. Some add coconut

milk for a creamy taste. People believe that the cone-shaped rice in tumpeng represents one of the many mountains in Java that govern the world. "This dish aims to glorify the mountain as the abode of the ancestral spirits" (antaranews.com, 2021, Chapter History of tumpeng, para. 2). Javanese believe that a God lives on the top of the mountain. Its usage acknowledges their relationship to God and his guidance (Jati, 2014). Ayu, a well-known culinary instructor in Indonesia since the 1970s, believes its cone shape points to the one God (Aw, 2020). People believe that the mountain Mahameru houses God at the peak of it. People believe the side dishes are God's hands, who lives on the mountain and is always ready to help (Jatikusuma, 2013). On the other meanings, Aw (2020) describes them as:

> … bean sprouts and long beans in the form of urap-urap (mixed with grated coconut) are aimed at promoting interaction and friendliness. Botok tawon (bees with grated coconut) symbolizes the character of bees, which are beneficial, always needed and make a lot of friends. Ayam ingkung (whole chicken with head facing upward) signifies a gesture in the direction of God, and rempeyek teri (small fried chips) is intended to depict harmony. (paras. 13–14)

This Javanese story of tumpeng is woven into the lives of many Indonesians, their religiosity, and their spirituality in every aspect of their lives. The mountain reminds us of Mt. Sinai, where God emphasized to Moses that there is only one God but Him, and we must worship Him (Ex. 20:3, 5). It reminds us that our lives are pointed towards him who is our help with his righteous right hand (Is. 41:10). The meaning of side dishes that Aw (2020) describes is well connected to the remaining ten commandments that bring humanity to live harmoniously with one another, to honor (their parents), and to respect one another without harming each other (Ex. 20:12-17). Ten Commandments significantly overlap with how the story of tumpeng is designed, as both focus on living

Photo 1: Tumpeng with side dishes.

together in love. This example shows how the Scripture's teaching of the Ten Commandments can meaningfully connect to the oral culture of the people. Understanding God's Grand Narrative is most effectively achieved through stories already in a given culture.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Cashew seeds are like systematic theology, giving most theologians the foundational principle or propositional statement of the truth from the Scripture. However, there is more to explore: the juicy part, the cashew fruit itself. Eating the entire fruit is basically what the narrative theology is all about. It gives us the flavor and rich part of Scripture through stories, parables, and powerful experiences of its characters. God has defined and shaped humanity through our unique stories embedded in every culture. It is through the stories in every culture that will bridge us to understanding God and his Grand Narrative. The narratives used in Romans give us a model of knowing, learning, and understanding the truth of Scripture by looking at narratives. It shows that we can relish the cashew seed and the fruit. It brings us to the conclusion that God's Word is not

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just a methodical treatise but a captivating story for the hearers' minds and hearts.

Given the absence of specific instructions in the Bible regarding methodologies or approaches for theology, it suggests that there is no universal approach to comprehending the Grand Narrative of Scripture. Recognizing that a systematic approach may limit a comprehensive understanding of the stories, especially for oral learners, this research advocates embracing narrative theology as a valid approach.

Finally, the authors of this paper recommend further research on the use and significance of narratives in Scripture. We also recommend further studies on how we can better utilize local narratives and arts, such as drama and songs, to connect with the grand narratives of Scripture. It would be interesting to see the increased impact of narrative theology on discipleship and theological education.

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Embraced Taboo: An Ethnoscopic Analysis of Non-monogamous Practices in Nigeria

Kehinde Seyi Ojelade

Abstract: The widespread social acceptance of non-monogamous sexual practices among the Yoruba people in Nigeria is a key issue for Christian discipleship. Using ethnoscopic analysis, I examine how ancestral traditions perpetuate the issue. Despite its cultural entrenchment, this practice conflicts with Christian teachings on fidelity and monogamy. The paper uses Thigpen's ethnoscopic framework to explore the discipleship issue through cultural, biblical, missional, and educational lenses. I highlight the necessity of culturally appropriate discipleship strategies and tools that fit the needs of oral learners. Ultimately, the research seeks to foster faithful Christian living that aligns with biblical principles while navigating the complex cultural landscape of Nigeria.

Keywords: discipleship, ethnoscopy, Nigeria, non-monogamous practice
Orality reliance level: Very low orality reliance ■□□□□

This paper explores the controversial topic of socially accepted non-monogamous practice in Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba people. Using Thigpen's (2023) ethnoscopic research approach, I will examine the issue through cultural, scriptural, missiological, and educational lenses. I aim to discover an appropriate response through Christian discipleship that will encourage faithful living toward God, spouses, and neighbors amidst the complex cultural landscape of Nigeria, challenging traditional beliefs and promoting healthy and mature Christian faith and praxis.

My personal experience with non-monogamous practice among the Yoruba was highlighted when I went to spend time in June of 2019 with the Reverend Joel Alani, a Baptist missionary with twenty-five years of experience in Odo-Oje near Jabata, Nigeria. Following my seminary education, I visited the community to assist Reverend Alani in teaching and discipling young adults and middle-aged individuals. Reverend Alani expressed his concerns about the persistence of non-monogamous practice among church members who displayed syncretistic acceptance of ancestral traditions in combination with Biblical teachings. According to Song, Christian discipleship is often overlooked in three instances: syncretism, split-level Christianity, and nominalism (Song, 2023). The challenge at hand is how to dismantle the present culture of infidelity and spiritual compromise that has led to widespread immorality.

I firmly believe that our response to such cultural issues should be through discipleship strategies that are accessible and engaging for the target audience. However, the discipleship strategy used in the community was a text-based curriculum heavily influenced by the Western cultural context. As a teaching tool, it reminded me of the style of content I had encountered in the Seminary during my studies. It was apparent from my encounter with the local people that the community consisted mainly of farmers, fishermen, and people who rely on oral tradition for learning. I began to contemplate whether or not the teachings could resonate with the highly oral reliant needs of the community.

The Social Acceptance of Non-monogamous practice

The Yoruba people, constituting about 16% of Nigeria's population, have a rich ethnolinguistic heritage, comprising Muslims, Christians, and traditionalists, with distinct cultural practices and beliefs (National et al., 2016). Their culture, rooted in both spiritual and physical realities, emphasizes the dominance of the spiritual realm in shaping physical existence (Mbiti, 1979, p.120; Awolalu, 1979, pp. 19–20; Adamo, 2021, p. 8). Tracing the historical development of societal norms within Nigeria, it is apparent that the customary behaviors of influential men in African societies have deep roots in ancestral and cultural traditions. Like many other African societies, the Yoruba adhere to patriarchal structures where men hold privileged positions over women (Newbigin, 1995; Igboin, 2011, p. 100).

The influence of these ancestral traditions is one of the contributing factors to the ill-treatment of women among the Yoruba. A traditional view relegates women to mere possessions, utilized for labor, prosperity, and spiritual protection (Tamale, 2014, p. 150). Adetunji (2001) notes that the cultural and gender biases against African women start from birth, with baby girls often receiving less enthusiastic receptions compared to baby boys (p. 106). Consequently, such inferior treatment from infancy may perpetually marginalize individuals. (Familusi, 2012, p. 300).

The ancestral and cultural traditions passed on from generation to generation impact how women are viewed today in Nigerian society. The common objectification and mistreatment of women are tied to the social view of women as spiritual conduits for success and prosperity. A local proverb asserts, *"Aye lo binrin, ko se sonu,"* roughly translating to, *"One of the greatest mysteries in this life is that women are the world; we can't live without them!"* This is one of several proverbs that emphasize the significance of women in our lives. People also believe that the ancestral "gods of infidelity" have bestowed some women with wealth, blessings, and good fortune. For men to access these blessings and good fortune, they must engage in sexual intercourse with the blessed woman. The opposite can also be the case, wherein a cursed woman can bring trouble to a man through his relationship with her.

There is a local saying that is often used to identify someone who is associated with these traditional beliefs and practices - *"Omo ase ale jeje, bi eniti ko ni obinrin nile,"* which means, *"A man whose forefathers behaved promiscuously with women as though they were not even married."* This phrase will typically be used in conjunction with the name of a man to identify his heritage and connection to these traditional beliefs about the role of women and intercourse in the blessed or cursed status of men. Kebo (2023) recounts a conversation with a grandmother, who explained how the phrase is used. She described that some African parents, especially mothers, invoke the ancestral spirits of womanizing upon their male children by declaring over them, *"Omo ase ale jeje, bi eniti ko ni obinrin nile."* This sort of dedication would promote the practice of non-monogamy in the future of the child.

This belief regarding women's power over men's fortunes highlights the traditional understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings and how each person can exert influence on the other. It suggests that visible or invisible beings can bring fortune and address challenges. Because of this particular ontological orientation, the acceptance of non-monogamy is heightened among its adherents, even though it is widely considered socially taboo. In the Odo-Oje context, adultery, promiscuity, and a generally non-monogamous lifestyle are permitted for some due to their accepted role in the quest for spiritual solutions to the challenges of life.

Socially accepted non-monogamous behavior is not restricted to rural areas. Now, the influence of these practices has extended and can be found throughout the cities of

Nigeria due to national migration. Men in Urban areas seeking wealth, blessing, and good fortune will visit prostitution centers as part of these ritualistic sexual practices. The belief and practice of *"omo ase ale jeje, bi eniti ko ni obinrin nile"* was traditionally associated with polygamy and the collection of multiple wives. However, the convenience of prostitutes allows men to pursue the blessing without the added complication of bringing a new woman into the marital home.

This issue is growing in relevance as it is no longer only people from traditionalist backgrounds who engage in such lifestyles; instead, it is even evidenced among those who claim to follow Christ. One example of such a case was Komi, who was in his early forties. Komi was actively engaged in non-monogamous behavior, but soon after becoming a Christian, he began to question if his actions were appropriate. He pondered if anything could replace the allure of infidelity and whether or not open bigamy and adultery would contradict his newfound faith or jeopardize his relationship with God. As time went on, he understood that the Bible spoke about his behavior in terms of adultery. Longman (2016) defines adultery as "extramarital sex that deliberately and maliciously disrupts marital relations" (p. 205), which encompasses various forms such as bigamy, cheating, and philandering (Balswick & Balswick, 2019).

The deceitful and unfaithful act of adultery significantly shapes the character of the individual involved. The abandoned spouse often experiences feelings of betrayal, neglect, anger, and confusion. Children within the family unit may also sense the discord and separation between their parents, leading to discomfort and uncertainty about the future. Meanwhile, the person engaging in the affair grapples with uncertainty regarding their role in the adulterous relationship and its potential outcomes. Clearly, the beliefs and practices reflected by the phrase *"omo ase ale jeje, bi eniti ko ni obinrin nile"* must be addressed to succeed in raising disciples who are committed to faithfully following the life

and teachings of Jesus. Now, we turn to a research tool that can be utilized to understand the issue better and to develop an appropriate discipleship response.

Framework Used to Explore and Address the Issue

For this paper, I have utilized the "ethnoscopic" process proposed by Thigpen. (Thigpen, 2023; 2015). Thigpen describes "ethnoscopy" as

> a novel exploratory framework, using multiple lenses to explore the issues and unearth appropriate responses. Like the lenses of a microscope, these form a framework or system for a different kind of analysis – an "ethnoscopic" analysis, a way of viewing and examining cultural issues. (2015, p. 2)

Four lenses are included in the ethnoscopic process: cultural, biblical, missional, and educational. I now move to explore the cultural issue of socially accepted non-monogamous practice among the Yoruba people through these four lenses of ethnoscopy. My investigative journey will be guided by the following questions: What cultural and social factors have hindered righteous living as intended by the Creator? What insights does the Bible offer on adultery? What strategies can be employed for missional transformation, and what innovative teaching methods can facilitate this process?

Analyzing with the Cultural Lens

African lifestyle and activities reflect ancestral behaviors and practices that originated from past events. These behaviors and practices have become norms and traditions within family lineages, communities, societies, and subsequent generations. In African cultures, particularly within the Yoruba tribe, extramarital sexual affairs are approached differently for men and women. According to Onayemi (1999), women are expected to remain faithful to their husbands, while men often have more leeway. It is commonly accepted for women to maintain composure even when their husbands
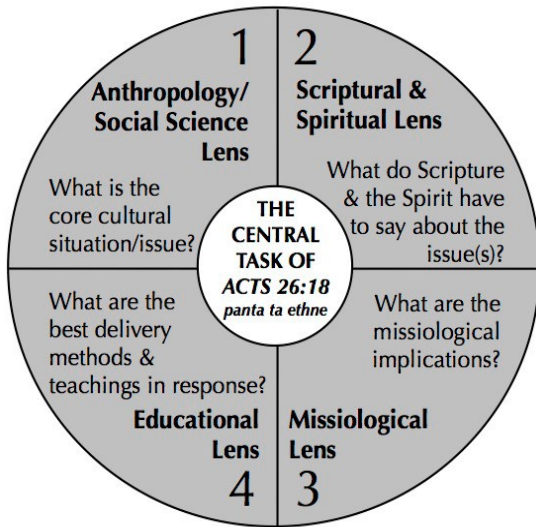
A proposed framework for Ethnoscopic Analysis (Thigpen, 2015, p. 4)

engage in extramarital affairs (Familusi, 2012). An example of this attitude can be seen in the lyrics of Ebenezer Obey, a Yoruba musician, who sings that:

Okunrin le ni aya mefa
Ko bu ru.
Okunrin kan soso
Ni Oluwa yan fobinrin

"A man can have six wives.
It is not bad.
But to one man only
God appointed a woman to marry" (p. 304).

Although other societies might see non-monogamous behavior as a drawback or taboo, some from within the Yoruba culture see it as a necessity for addressing the felt needs of their lives. For instance, in Odo-Oje cosmology, a man's success is believed to depend on the luck and positive energy brought by his wife, a belief exemplified by the saying *"Ese obinrin yi dara,"* meaning, "Union with this woman is profitable." This belief suggests that a woman's presence can bring good fortune to the entire family, akin to having the strength of three nations behind them. Hence, there is a link between current beliefs and practices and those of the ancestors, who emphasized the importance of having women in the household. However, there are instances where specific qualities in women

are sought after to achieve certain goals. In such cases, even legal wives may find themselves accepting the presence of another woman with desirable traits, as tradition dictates a level of friendship and acceptance without envy or disapproval.

These long-held beliefs regarding women have practical consequences. One example is the contentious issue of child marriage in the country. The abduction of women and girls by Boko Haram jihadists in northeastern Nigeria has highlighted this issue for the whole nation. It has sparked heated debates and calls for attention to the challenges faced by women and girls in conflict zones. Another example is the recent incident of an eighty-five-year-old monarch taking four young girls as wives, all of whom bore him children. Despite his advanced age, the monarch openly preferred young wives, including university graduates and undergraduates. When the fortune and attractiveness of these women waned due to childbearing, the monarch sought out younger replacements. This cycle perpetuates the notion that married or single women are expected to submit without complaint, symbolized by the saying *"Oba gbe ese le,"* meaning "The king owns the land." Such narratives reflect longstanding societal norms, where polygamy and non-monogamous practice has been accepted for centuries without significant challenge.

Using the Scriptural and Spiritual Lens of Ethnoscopic Analysis

Examining the Odo-Oje attachment to promiscuous living through the scriptural lens involves looking at the Bible as a trustworthy guide for human behavior. The Bible provides principles for all aspects of life (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2013, p. 13), including moral standards like the Ten Commandments. These commandments, found in both the Old and New Testaments, highlight the sanctity of marriage and prohibit adultery.

For instance, Ex. 20:14, 17 explicitly forbid adultery and coveting the spouse of a neighbor, emphasizing the sacredness of the

marital bond. Lev. 20:10 prescribes severe punishment for adultery, stating that both the adulterer and adulteress should be put to death. Prov. 6:32 reinforces the gravity of adultery, highlighting its self-destructive nature. The Old Testament, guided by Mosaic Law, condemns adultery, while the New Testament continues to discourage promiscuity. 2 Pet. 2:14 warns against the pursuit of sinful desires, including adultery.

Faithful Christian living demands sacrificing some earthly pleasures, which can lead to a struggle to adhere to divine teachings. The emphasis of Christianity on monogamy can be a stumbling block for some, leading them to reject salvation and adhere to ancestral beliefs that permit immoral behavior. Addressing this issue requires spiritual intervention through prayer and studying the Word of God in a language and context that resonates with individuals. The Christian community must counter the prevailing societal mentality that condones any behavior, as it obscures the vision of building genuine and godly relationships (Balswick & Balswick, 2019, p. 20).

Using the Missiological Lens of Ethnoscopic Analysis

Bosch (2011) pointed out various shifts in focus within mission theology, advocating for a mission approach that does not just accept cultural realities but aims to transform them. This aligns with my rejection of the social acceptance of non-monogamous practice. Helping new converts to confidently embrace the Triune God often involves confronting their previous dependencies and providing vital support from the Christian community to navigate the transition. Transitioning from viewing one's conversion as merely a personal experience to understanding it as part of a larger narrative requires a systematic approach. This shift involves finding a new reliance on God as the ultimate provider. Newbigin (1989) emphasizes the importance of understanding the Bible's narrative to comprehend contemporary history and identity formation.

Effective contemporary mission work requires an inclusive community to prevent new converts from backsliding. Missionaries must communicate the gospel message in a way that resonates with the recipients and addresses their real felt needs (Song, 2006). Genuine love for the gospel entails supporting newly converted individuals and helping them shift their trust from other sources to the Christian faith. Strong Christian fellowship, rooted in testimonies from the broader narrative of Scripture, plays a vital role in this process (Thigpen, 2016). Understanding and embracing a missiological perspective can foster a more holistic approach to spiritual devotion, support new converts in their journey, and ensure that the gospel message resonates authentically with diverse cultural contexts.

Using the Educational Lens of Ethnoscopic Analysis

Now, we move to explore how appropriate teaching and discipleship can help individuals break from socially accepted non-monogamous practice and their ancestral ties, which have led to sexual immortality. How can they see life as meaningful, leading toward a greater purpose, with the ultimate destiny being a divine connection with God? What teaching methods can address reality's spiritual and physical aspects, preparing individuals for their earthly duties and spiritual salvation? Additionally, the Odo-Oje community may perceive biblical teachings as somewhat disconnected from their daily lives. Therefore, it is crucial to bridge the gap between these teachings and the practices of new converts.

In a diverse society like ours, where multiple religions coexist, knowledge often aligns with what people want to hear (2 Tim. 4:3). Temptations may offer immediate pleasure but lead to destruction. At the same time, discussions about salvation may be overlooked. Therefore, using various tools such as words, language, arts, stories, and technologies to engage Christians, churches, and mission groups in open dialogue is

essential. However, replacing deeply ingrained cultural beliefs will not happen overnight, as individuals must learn to navigate between light and darkness, akin to an infant learning to focus on their caregiver's eyes.

Newbigin (1989) emphasizes the need for personal commitment and reliance on trusted tools throughout the learning process. Thigpen (2022) underscores the importance of Christian education and discipleship spreading outward, equipping believers with knowledge of God's word, spiritual defense, prayer, and trust in God. She writes,

> Christian education and discipleship must spread outward, equipping every believer in God's Word, in spiritual apologetics, powerful prayer, and trust in a faithful God. New believers need deep and abiding kinship relationships with other believers and their Creator, and they need gospel presentations and discipleship processes that can be easily reproduced for their ancestral love. (Thigpen, 2022, p. 24)

New converts require strong relationships with other believers and gospel teachings that can be easily shared with their communities. As Christians, we must be willing to adapt and refine our tools to better align with reality. Personal commitment is crucial but should reflect a broader, universal interest, seeking confirmation through shared experiences.

Some learning experiences can be transformative, even if initially challenging (Thigpen, 2016), highlighting the importance of trusted teaching methods. According to Thigpen (2023), adopting strategic pedagogies for the oral majority is essential. She suggests four significant categories of oral pedagogies: 1) pedagogies of bonding (affective (heart) dealing with attachment, allegiance, emotion, 2) pedagogies of believing (cognitive (head) dealing with beliefs, knowledge, truth, trust, 3) pedagogies of behaving (conative (hands) dealing with moral, ethical, and loving behavior, and 4) pedagogies of belonging (social (herd), dealing with tradition, ritual, identity.

I believe it is critical to help the Yoruba people understand how their individual stories fit into the larger narrative of the story of God and to emphasize divine guidance against detrimental lifestyles. For instance, Jesus' approach in John chapter 8 emphasizes forgiveness while cautioning against repeating harmful behaviors. Interactive discussions facilitate transformation and align with social norms, aiding in understanding new perspectives beyond ritual practices. Another aspect of teaching through narrative is the strategy of employing narrative teaching tailored to address specific cultural issues. For example, to address socially accepted non-monogamous practice, discipleship materials like the "Christian Sexuality" manual can be presented in the learners' native language through oral storytelling and drama.

The recognition of the high orality reliance within African communities, including the Yoruba tribes, underscores the significance of utilizing oral teaching methods. Practices like storytelling and interactive dialogue resonate well with oral learners and aid in challenging and reshaping beliefs. In teaching and discipleship, Bible storytelling can engage learners actively. After sharing a story, learners are encouraged to reflect individually on various aspects of the narrative, fostering personal connections and insights. Group activities reinforce learning, with designated leaders guiding discussions and ensuring comprehension. Evaluating learners' ability to retell stories to their peers enhances group cohesion and learning outcomes. Oral pedagogies facilitate effective learning and transformative experiences within culturally diverse communities. By leveraging familiar communication methods and narrative techniques, educators can navigate cultural barriers and foster meaningful connections with learners, ultimately promoting holistic growth and understanding.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined socially accepted non-monogamous practice exemplified by the saying and belief *"omo ase ale jeje, bi eniti ko ni obinrin nile."* within Yoruba culture, the social acceptance of non-monogamous practice persists for some as an appropriate lifestyle due to its association with the wealth, blessing, and good fortune that is believed to come through intercourse with divinely favored women. Although this practice has ancient roots and persists in some communities, a closer examination reveals it is out-of-sync with most of those holding contemporary values.

Adultery, polygamy, and sexual promiscuity are increasingly perceived as immoral across various tribes and ethnic groups in Nigeria. This disapproval stems from its harmful impact on community cohesion and the potential for severe consequences, including death for those involved (Monday, 2016, p. 278). Biblical values emphasize monogamous, lifelong marriage as the ideal framework for sexual relationships, as supported by religious teachings. Marital intimacy is enriched by deep, covenantal love encompassing all life aspects.

To address the challenge of the recognized cultural issue, I have embarked on a transformative journey by implementing Christian-based teachings on sexuality and marriage, particularly tailored for oral learners, as it aligns well with the preferred learning style in these communities. I have initiated daily prayer sessions to seek guidance and strength from God for individuals like Komi who still struggle with the allure of the belief and practice of *"Omo ase ale jeje bi eni ti ko ni obinrin nile."* This ongoing intervention aims to provide spiritual support for those grappling with this significant issue within Yoruba culture.

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BOOK REVIEW

Character Theology: Engaging God through His Cast of Characters

Maria Angelica de Vera

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing today's church is reaching and engaging the next generation. Known to be digital natives, these young people grew up quite literally with a mobile phone in hand. They are a generation whose minds and values have been shaped largely by the internet and often distaste traditional religion and values. Yet even so, this generation of young people hunger for authenticity, authentic relationships, community, and, yes, surprisingly to some, spirituality. While not explicitly naming these issues, Tom Steffen, professor emeritus of Intercultural Studies at Biola University, and Ray Neu, director of Orality Coaching at Spoken Worldwide, through their book *Character Theology: Engaging God through His cast of Characters*, give all those in the business of reaching and ministering to the next generation a powerful tool that they can use to deal with those challenges. This tool, which revolves primarily around narratives, is a means of interpreting scripture and drawing out truth, meaning, and theology through the characters within a story. It is called Character Theology, just as the title of the book states. Through Character Theology, one discovers truth and ethics in the lives and interactions of the characters within the narrative sections of scripture; it is theology in action!

Character Theology takes the reader on a journey of discovery, unveiling not just Character Theology itself but even its precursors. Divided into two parts, each written in a distinct style, the authors make a case for Character Theology, making its benefit for the church explicit. Yet, as they did that, they made it clear that Character Theology was never meant to replace any existing theology but to expand what is already there.
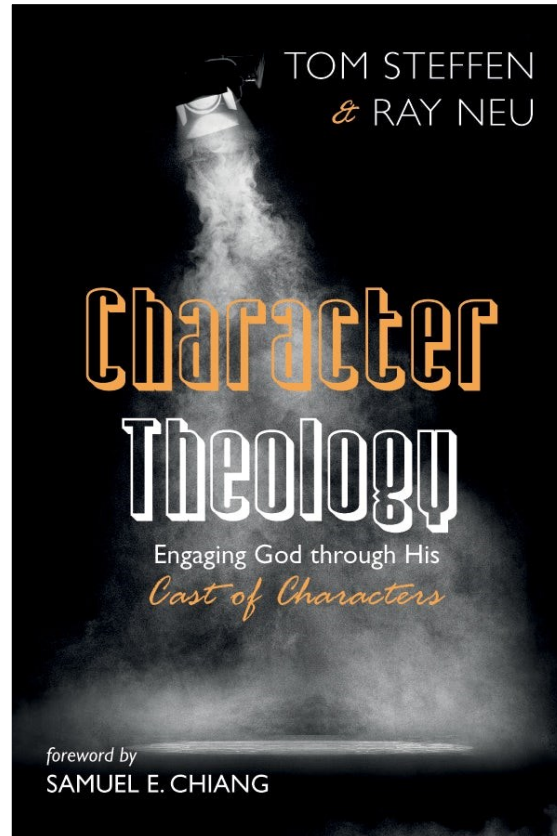
According to Steffen and Neu, Character Theology is not a new concept; it has existed as long as we have been telling stories. Throughout the book, the authors worked to recover what has long been overshadowed by the priority given to exegetical methods that focus on grammar and every sort of technicality. The book is written in simple language and without jargon, showing that theology does not need to be intimidating. It also shows that anyone can engage in theological reflection, learned or not, well-educated or not, read or not.

The authors paint a beautiful picture of Character Theology. The most striking of which for me, who has been ministering to the next generation, is how it brings out the humanity of the Bible without losing the sense of the Divine. It makes the Bible more "in touch" with the realities of this life: the joys and the pain, the sorrows and the laughter, the struggles and the triumphs. In short, through Character Theology, the Bible becomes more relatable and gains authenticity. It is brought to life amid seemingly dead propositions and abstractions. During this time when the church's relevance is quickly eroding, theology done in the manner described in the book enlivens its witness,

making it more attractive to young people who long to see tangible proof that the Bible and its words are still very much applicable today.

Additionally, the authors clarify that Character Theology engages a person's entire being. As a result, it fosters greater ownership of the resulting interpretations and reflections. It is not theology that is simply shoved down one's throat. Instead, it is a theology that sticks to one's mind and heart. This fact is crucial as the world is already so saturated with content, each claiming to be "truth." Character Theology allows young people to discover and experience truth for themselves in a non-threatening space and manner.

Finally, Character Theology leads to the recovery of the communal nature of Christianity that got lost to the over-emphasis on individual salvation and holiness. Yet more than just the recovery of the communal aspect of Christianity, one will notice that Character Theology can be instrumental in creating a safe space for each community member. It allows people to remove their masks, let go of their pretenses, and be honest with their struggles and brokenness—for even the characters used by God were broken and had fallen, just like us today. Young people today crave this kind of authenticity within a community. They long for a safe space where they can let go of pretense and freely air their struggles. Character Theology can be a vehicle toward that.

TOM STEFFEN & RAY NEU

Character Theology

Engaging God through His Cast of Characters

foreword by SAMUEL E. CHIANG

The authors, without a doubt, did an amazing job at defining and putting forth the benefits of Character Theology. However, in my perspective, as one who ministers to the next generation, one weakness of their book is the lack of examples. While the second half of the book was called *Character Theology Demonstrated*, I found it to be mostly feedback from the participants of various engaging Bible characters discussion groups across the globe and from the storyteller himself. I felt like the authors were still making a case for Character Theology rather than demonstrating it. Perhaps I expected an actual demonstration from the preparation to the implementation. I know that the goal of the authors, as stated in the introduction, is for the reader to know why it is important to know and practice Character Theology (p. 5). However, as one who is already convinced of its benefits, I would have wanted to read about how Character Theology can be implemented in my context. Perhaps it would have also helped if the examples, or even case studies, were peppered throughout the book, not just in the second half, making it easier to put this into practice. Just as driving is a practical skill, so is theologizing in the manner put forth by the authors. To practice Character Theology and grasp it better, one needs to see it modeled, especially since many of us serving in the church are not only so accustomed to very cognitive theologies but also have been trained to handle the word in a very technical manner. Perhaps having an accompanying video material or a workbook

that one can go through would greatly help workers better understand Character Theology, how it is done, and how it should be implemented.

As one who ministers to and interacts closely with the next generation, I am convinced that Character Theology is and would be an effective tool in dealing with the specific challenges that come with the task. This generation's longing for authenticity and authentic relationships, community, spirituality, and so much more can be met as Character Theology is implemented in ministries that care for them. Hopefully, this book will be the beginning of many more such resources and tools needed to minister to the next generation.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Often described as energetic, Angelica is passionate about energizing, engaging, and empowering the church for God's mission. Prior to studying for a Ph.D., Angelica pioneered a missions organization named Megumi Grace to the nations, a ministry with a vision to see every community of Christ followers actively engaged in making communities of Christ followers of all nations. She is also an artist and has illustrated children's books; and is a musician, playing the violin in various occassions and settings. She has an M.Div. in Biblical Studies (honors) from the Asian Theological Seminary. ✉ maria.angelica.b.devera@outlook.com

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