



“Truth that Sticks: How to Communicate Velcro Truth in a Teflon World” by Avery Willis and Mark Snowden (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010)

reviewed by Karl Dahlfred

As I have been learning and reading about oral Bible storying, one of the questions that has come up in my mind is, “To what extent can storying be used? Don’t we need to use other methods too in order to bring people all the way in discipleship and leadership?” In “Truth that Sticks”, Avery Willis and Mark Snowden have not only laid out a vision for biblical storying but have also explained how it connects with discipleship, leadership, and church growth.

Practice, Not Theory

From the very first page of "Truth that Sticks," it is obvious that both authors are primarily practitioners, not academics. That's not to say that the book is not intelligent or well reasoned. It is. But the passion that drives them is the desire to see people become disciples of Christ. At appropriate times, they include statistics and theory about literacy and orality, but the bulk of the book is an explanation of the methods of biblical storying and its use in discipleship in the local church. Having already read some more theoretical works on orality and storytelling, I appreciated the authors' practical and accessible approach to the subject at hand.

Without rehashing the entire contents of the book, I want to use the remainder of this review to highlight points and emphases that I found helpful, as well as address some questions and concerns that came up as I read.

Story Telling "How-To"s

In some of the earlier chapters of the book (Ch. 4-7), the authors lay out how to use oral Bible story telling in small groups. What kind of questions should you ask? How do you get people involved? How do you tell a story to engage the senses and the imagination? How do you get other people to tell and retell the story? While I don't feel bound to memorize the exact way that they did it, it was helpful to see the details in their process, and to see that it is really not that complicated. And it was fantastic to read stories of people who were unengaged and uninterested starting to tune in when stories were told and unpacked well in group discussion.

Advantages of Storying in Evangelism and Discipleship

A commonly heard objection to bible storying is that Bible stories are just for kids (135). But as the authors point out, everyone loves a good story. And stories (as opposed to straight Bible exposition) have several advantages to them. When people learn stories and internalize them, they have the power to change your worldview (Ch. 12). Stories are useful in evangelism (ch. 13) because they are less confrontational than apologetics, and easier and more natural to use than a list of points in a Gospel tract. They are also relational, and foster interaction better than just handing someone a tract. In the discipleship of children, parents can easily use Bible stories to teach their children the faith (164-167), and children can even take those stories and share them with other children (167-168). Stories can even be used to answer theological questions and to train leaders.

The Limitations of Storying

As the authors' present it, oral bible story telling sounds like the key to evangelism and discipleship that the church has been looking for. But is it? Surely there are weak points and limitations to the storying method, aren't there? In chapter 14, the authors try to answer objections that storying is a passing fad, and that storying cannot take people as deep and as far as they need to go in maturing as disciples of Christ. While it is apparent that the authors are completely sold on oral bible storying, it was good to read that they stop short of saying that this method, done their way, is the silver bullet that the church needs to win the world and save itself from immanent death.

Oral bible storying, as the authors lay it out, is intended for oral preferred learners. This isn't a code word for "illiterate people" but means that lots of people can read at a basic level, but they don't read, or at least they don't receive and process most of their information through reading. In the American context, there are lots of people like this, so storying is not just for illiterate tribal people out in a jungle someplace. However, the authors admit that if you are ministering to people who can read well, you probably won't want to use storying exclusively. In fact, storying and studying the Bible complement each other well and "the storying process causes people to want to study the Bible more" (177).

Becoming Bible People

Evangelicals like to think about themselves as “Bible people” who take the Scriptures seriously, as opposed to liberals who do not. The embarrassing truth, however, is that most people who call themselves evangelicals are largely ignorant of many basic truths of the Christian faith. Or if they are familiar with them, they don’t necessarily believe them, nor live like they believe them. But the authors’ testify that in their experience, “storying produces disciples who are ‘walking and talking Bibles’” (182). These people know their Bibles and can share them with others. The fact that storying holds out the prospect of really getting people into the Scriptures, and the Scriptures into them, is a very compelling argument for using this method. Storying would also seem to lend itself to equipping people with Bible portions that they can share directly in evangelism, long after isolated verses have become fuzzy in their memory.

Concluding Thoughts

“Truth that Sticks” is helpful and practical, and the storying method presented seems to “work” in getting the Bible into people and people into the Bible. I hesitate to put too much stock in any new methodology, especially one that promises to be “revolutionary.” And the numbers that the authors cite for conversions and church growth as people are “led to Christ” seem... well, incredible. It is hard to believe that any particular methodology could be the key to such exponential church growth. But at the same time, oral Bible storying might just be that good. I have been impressed with not only the testimonies in the book but also with my limited experience in using Bible storying in a class setting, and in leading family devotions. Bible storying holds a lot of potential for evangelism, discipleship, and leadership development. Any method that is helping people come face to face with the living Christ in the words of Scripture is worthy of serious consideration. And more than that, it is worth doing.

