
Bible study cassettes: a tool which churches perceive to be of value in furthering their goals

by Keith Benn
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Twelve months ago, we began writing scripts for Bible study cassettes for the Central Bontoc translations of Genesis 1–11 and James. The response has been quite incredible.

In the area of the Philippines where we are working, there are approximately 20,000 Central Bontoc speakers living in some 20 villages of Mountain Province, and perhaps half again that many living and working outside the province. The literacy rate among the Bontocs in Mountain Province decreases in proportion to the distance of communities from the capital of Bontoc. More than 50 percent of the young people (age 15–30) are functionally literate, but perhaps less than 15 percent of the older adults have these skills. Approximately 75 percent of the Bontocs claim to be bilingual in Ilocano, the trade language of the area, but their comprehension of Scripture in the second language is low.

There are a variety of churches in the Central Bontoc region, including Roman Catholic, Anglican (Episcopal), two varieties of Baptist, and one not generally considered part of the Protestant tradition, called Espiritista. All but one of these churches has welcomed the recent Bible study cassettes with open arms.

In writing the scripts for these Bible study recordings, we used the following basic pattern:

1. Introduction
2. Scripture reading
3. Bible study question
4. Instructions
5. Answer to question
6. Hymn

If a second question was asked of the same passage, Steps 3–5 were repeated.

1. Introduction. This is brief, and tells what Scripture passage will now be read, and perhaps in a single sentence outlines the theme of the passage.
2. Scripture readings. We keep these short (no more than 10 verses); readings usually coincide with section headings of the translation. The Scripture readings were read by a well-known and respected member of the community, a man who is a pillar of the Catholic Church and the ex-mayor.

Bible study questions. These are simple questions designed to check understanding of the basic message. For example: In what we have read here, what advice does James give for rich people? The question is always repeated. Several other community leaders helped in recording the question and answer sections of the cassettes, including two Episcopal priests and a high school teacher. In all, some six men participated.

3. Instructions. The usual instruction is: Now, turn the cassette recorder off, and look for the answer to the question. This instruction was followed by a five-second blank on the cassette. An alternative way of handling this "When you hear the flute play (or any other kind of music), turn off the cassette and look for the answer to the question."
4. Answers. Initially, an answer may either be a direct quotation from the passage or a close paraphrase of it, quoting the verse along with the answer. The answer may then also give a cross-reference to other Scripture, quoting it and giving the reference. Answers, however, are kept brief.
5. Hymns. The James cassettes have proven to be more popular than the Genesis tapes. I think one reason for this is that many of the hymns on the James cassettes were specially written to reinforce the teaching of the passage under study. Some of these took a theme and expanded on it. For others, we simply took two or three verses which summed up a theme, and rewrote them to fit the syllable pattern of indigenous tunes. (Perhaps half of the songs on all the cassettes have indigenous tunes.) Then we gave these rewritten verses to singers who looked for indigenous tunes to fit the words. Approximately 10 soloists and 10 singing groups contributed to the musical portions of the tapes.

The response?

This was the sixth attempt we had made to produce a Scripture on cassette programme. We hoped to achieve a three-fold goal:

- To give illiterate people an opportunity to hear the Scripture
- To make a programme so interesting that even people who don't go to church will want to hear it
- To provide the churches with a tool they perceive to be of use

Our fourth attempt almost achieved this goal. We had done the recordings in cooperation with, and under the supervision of the Catholic priest. Most of the hymns were written to thematically reinforce the Scripture readings and most used indigenous tunes. However, that attempt did not fully achieve the second and third aspects of the goal. The Scripture portions that were read were too long, with the result that as a whole the programme was less interesting, and the churches did not make extensive use of them. Nevertheless, these cassettes did "light a few scattered fires," and several individuals have continued to listen to them, or use them as a teaching aid for the last three years.

But the more recently produced Bible study cassettes have swept the Bontoc area like bush fire. In the few months since these cassettes first became available, we have distributed over 400 to church leaders in each of the five denominations.

- Two churches which had never before found a place either for the printed Bontoc Scriptures, or for Scripture on cassette, are now using the Bible studies from time to time in at least seven places.
- Priests who work in a neighboring dialect which has far more Scripture in their language than we have, are buying our Bontoc Scripture and the new study cassettes out of their pockets, for use in Bible studies.
- Evangelists and village workers are being given sets of tapes by their respective church leaders and sent into the mountains to begin Bible studies.
- One church sent a missionary equipped with cassettes and Scripture portions to a neighboring language group. Six weeks later, the pastor of the sending church visited him and baptized 11 new believers. An elder, who had previously refused to help in making the cassettes, accompanied the pastor on this visit and became quite enthusiastic about their value in evangelism.
- An Espiritista church leader is planning to use the cassettes in outreach to a neighboring village.
- One old gentleman, concerned for the slowly dying village church in which he labored as a layman said: "I have been promising to do house to house visitation. Now with these cassettes I will be able to do it."
- Some folks from a Baptist church in Bontoc took the cassettes along when visiting a member in the local hospital. When they played the tape, 20-30 people gathered around to listen. They returned daily, expecting to terminate the study when their friend was discharged. But others asked to continue using the cassettes, and it was obvious that lives were being affected by the Word in Bontoc.

What excites us most is that people who have never before led a Bible study are now having regular studies in their homes. All in all, we are quite overwhelmed and praise the Lord for His Word going out.

Ownership of a radio-cassette is a status symbol in the area today, and many Bontocs have their own recorder. Batteries are available in the area, as well as some maintenance and repair services. As previously mentioned, churches buy sets of cassettes for their uses. In addition, I have about 15 players out on loan, primarily to older men in the community who are not Christians. Instructions for how to use the cassette are recorded on each tape.

I package 5 copies of the printed Scripture portions with corresponding cassettes and sell them as a package deal. My expectation is that the portions will be passed around among the listening groups. In this way, we believe the cassettes are promoting the use of the written Scripture.

Keys to success

In retrospect, we perceive five factors which have contributed to the success of these present cassettes.

1. Variety

Wherever possible, we avoided having long sections of speaking, usually no more than three minutes without a break of some kind. To create breaks, we sometimes inserted a hymn between question and answer, or even in the middle of a Bible reading.

2. Indigenous music

In Bontoc we have some indigenous tunes which are unsuitable for hymns. We have learnt this by trial and error. And what is suitable in one village is not necessarily acceptable in another. Even this sixth attempt has drawn negative reactions on some of the hymns, but at least some of the problem seems to resolve around the distinction between happy tunes and sad tunes, telling-a-story and giving-advice tunes, and the words we have put with them. Next time we need to work on matching the tune to the theme of the hymn. The tunes which are quite unacceptable are those too closely associated with sacrifice, death, and headhunting. This is also, unfortunately, true of Bontoc indigenous instrumental music. Instrumental music adds variety and interest.

It is interesting to note that two churches, which were previously the first to eschew the use of indigenous music, have been the ones who have put the Bible study cassettes to the best use so far. At last, church leaders are recognizing that Bontoc people really do enjoy their own music.

Some people say that musical interludes distract the listener, or that people tend to listen to the indigenous music and then "tune out" the speaking until music comes on again. In response to this, I would like to say that I have often seen Bontocs talking when I would like for them to listen. Bontoc people love to talk! At any one time, there may be 10 conversations going on simultaneously, even when someone is praying or speaking! But this cultural phenomenon, strange to our senses, is counterbalanced when we hear comments such as: "Wow, I never knew the Scripture was so clear!" or "When we hear the message using our own tunes, it comes through loud and clear!" Obviously someone is listening.

3. Church involvement

The Bible study cassettes were a community effort. We collected hymns from each of the four main churches, and solicited their help in recording. The result is that those who helped can now listen to the cassettes and hear their own hymns which they have sung. These are scattered throughout the cassettes.

Before making the cassettes, we gave out copies of the script to priests and pastors who were interested. Their help at that time was fairly minimal, probably because they did not expect to have any use for the end product. Perhaps next time they will give better feedback.

In the recording also, we used community leaders from three of the churches, including two priests. Those who helped in the recording have been good ambassadors.

4. Thematic unity

For James, we wrote more hymns than for Genesis, so there is better continuity between the hymns and the Bible studies. This, I think, is an essential ingredient in their greater popularity.

5. A felt need

The recent cassettes have come at a time when three of the churches have felt the need to hold Bible studies. A minister of the first church to be established in Bontoc, in the early years of this

century, told us that the reason the later churches have been able to make inroads into "their" territory is that the newcomers are having Bible studies for the people.

Conclusion

In the Bible study cassettes, we have discovered a tool which a variety of churches in Bontoc perceive to be of value. At present we are translating Luke, and now the church leaders are expectantly hoping that we will also make study tapes to go with it. We hope to do this, not on a chapter-by-chapter basis, but thematically, with one sixty-minute cassette, or one side of a sixty-minute cassette containing Scripture readings from one theme. In cooperation with one of the churches, and at their initiation, we are also hoping to produce a chapter-by-chapter Bible study guide which will consist solely of questions relating to a section of Scripture, together with one or two cross-references.

We are excited to see, for the first time, the Bontoc churches really using the Word in their language.

Editor's note: In reading Benn's original article, I asked him if he could share something of why he feels attempts 1-5 were not as successful as this more recent series.

In response he writes:

- Attempt 1: The product never got out to the people. Inadequate equipment used for recording.

Questions plagued us about the readers we had used—were they all Christians? Should they have been used? We also struggled with format, asking ourselves if Scripture had to be read word for word, or if some freedom could be given the readers to omit "he said" and other such "non-essential-for-spoken-language" items?

- Attempt 2: Moderately successful. Longish Scripture readings sandwiched with long hymns with semi-Western tunes. Hymns unrelated to the readings.
- Attempt 3: Evangelistic-type Scripture readings sandwiched with thematically matched native tuned hymns. But poorly recorded on inadequate equipment. Not widely distributed.
- Attempt 4: High quality recording of Genesis 1-11 with thematically matched native tuned hymns. Too little variety. Sometimes a whole chapter of Scripture without a break. Better acceptance than Attempt 2.
- Attempt 5: Reasonable quality recording of 1 John and Genesis 11-50, plus Mark selections. Better variety, short (10-15 verse) readings, sandwiched with sometimes thematically matched, native-tuned hymns. Problem: we went on furlough shortly after the tapes came out. Then the main reader died, preventing many potential listeners from being able to hear them.

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