

GOD

AS PUBLISHER

Tim Stafford (TimnPopie@aol.com), a well-known writer and editor for Christianity Today, challenges publishers to consider their acquisitions and publishing plans in light of the example the Scriptures provide.

The Bible tells us how to live a Christian life and what God is doing in the universe, but it also offers powerful inspiration for publishers. God is a publisher. Throughout history He has always sent His written word. God is a great publisher and we can learn so much by appropriating the power of the example He sets for us Christian writers, editors, and publishers.

If you have publishing problems, if you are working in an environment where there is no money, where the facilities are not good, the audience is resistant and so on, think about the problems that God's servants faced when He inspired them to publish. You, at least, do not have to publish on papyri, on scrolls. There were no printing presses.

When God began, the literate population was very small. Print can appeal to a minority. (It can, of course, speak to millions of people; it often has.) But, it also can appeal to a very targeted group. It probably enables us to target our audience more than any other medium. Though the literate population was very small, God did not limit Himself to producing material for very poor, barely literate audiences.

Instead, He produced one of the greatest books in history. He published great, powerful, inspiring literature that speaks to the greatest and the simplest minds.

Bible as example

Compare your publishing program against the Bible. How do you measure up? The Bible is not merely nourishment for your soul, but also an example for your publishing program. It is a challenge and an inspiration to be creative. Think about what is in the Bible. Think, for starters, about the literary forms that God chooses to use.

History and culture

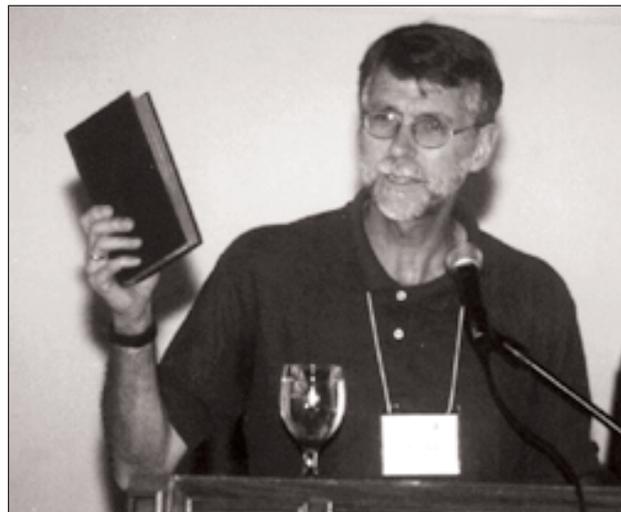
Much of the Bible is comprised of historical accounts. Some of them are family histories. Genesis, especially, is the history of how a family related to God. Genesis has absolutely amazing detail about the conflicts faced in families: father to son, brother to brother, husband and wife, sister to sister. We love to

read those stories, and preachers love to tell them, because they are histories of families and we all know how families are. Joseph's story of enslavement, imprisonment, and reconciliation with his family is meaningful to anybody who knows what it is like to suffer and to struggle. Even people who are not Christians can appreciate the reality of that story. Genesis is a marvelous way of communicating the power of God in real lives.

There is a lot of national history in the Bible. Some of this relates to God's miraculous purposes for the kingdom of Israel, but other parts of the Bible are actually quite removed from those inspirational accounts. Much of the material in 1 and 2 Kings is really a court history, a factual account. This opens up the possibilities of writing about political events, political affairs, political history. Contemporary issues offer us many different opportunities for communicating the Gospel. Is there anything like it in your publishing program?

The Bible also incorporates culture; it gives the cultural context of a nation, the stories, ceremonies, beliefs and practices of the Jewish people. Therefore, we also should





"The Bible has inspired my whole life and continues to inspire me," says Tim Stafford, speaking at Littworld 2002 in Manila, Philippines.

recognize that our cultures—within which we write and within which we publish—should be expressed and understood as part of who we are. Publish books on culture.

Law and reference

Leviticus is a book on law. It is not very elegant prose. Most people do not particularly enjoy reading Leviticus, which is not surprising, because readers do not sit down to read law books. Yet, in God's publishing program, it is all right to publish books that are factual and useful.

A publisher from Malaysia said she recently produced a book for churches on how to register with the government. That is not the sort of book a reader turns to for inspiration. But, it is a very useful book when you want to know the details of the very complicated registration process in her country. Leviticus is similar. Practical instruction is part of God's publishing program. What do people want to know? Is there a way that you can serve them? Consider books that provide helpful information.

Poetry, music and drama

What is Job? It is a story, a drama, a play. It is not a sermon, certainly, though it has some characters who preach bad sermons. Its characters are identified as speakers,



Christian truths.

In most countries, hymnbooks are very high on the publishing agenda, just after Bibles. God also published a hymnbook—the Psalms. It is a very good hymnbook, a magnificent piece of work. If you held up that hymnbook against most of our hymnbooks, ours look pretty poor as literature in comparison.

What about the Song of Solomon, a love poem? Is love poetry legitimate product for a Christian press? Apparently so, if we want to follow God's lead.

Through the Bible, God inspires us to aim high as writers. There is some absolutely beautiful language and amazing work in

it. However, not all of the Bible is beautiful. The language in Leviticus is not particularly gorgeous,

so it can be performed as a play. Story is a very powerful means of communicating. More and more, storytelling is an effective tool in the marketplace for communicating



because a law book demands language that is factual and true and gets to the point. A news report does not require fancy prose.

Human interest

Several books of the Bible tell stories of God's power in real life. Ruth, Esther, and Jonah were not important leaders in the history of Israel. The events that they went through do not seem to have any real connection with the development of Israel and the kingdom of God. Ruth was an insignificant woman, someone unknown except her ancestry of Jesus, yet God's work in her life, the problems she faced and the way she overcame them, are a great story.

The Bible presents real human beings. In Scripture, readers learn both good and bad. The Bible does not just tell what is wonderful; it tells the rough side as well. David, for example, is shown as a person of many passions, contradictions and challenges.

Memoirs, biographies and letters

Parts of Nehemiah are told in the first person. Memoirs are a wonderful mode of communication, and Nehemiah tells of how he came to Israel and began to rebuild

the wall. Personal remembrances, especially leaders who had a real impact, are very effective.

The Gospels are kind of biographies of Jesus; they are compelling reading at all times. Not many biographies are published by Christians today, but they have been a powerful means of communicating the Gospel in the past.

Much of the New Testament consists of letters, such as Galatians. A letter is an intimate communication from one person to another, or to a group of people. In modern times some letters have been published as literature, but Christians do not publish many letters. When I am really interested in learning more about an author, sooner or later I want to read their collected letters, and those are usually very interesting reading. Consider publishing works in this form.

Wisdom books

Do Christian publishers offer anything like the book of Proverbs today? In the United States, some



have been doing “proverbial” publishing with the Chicken Soup for the Soul series or small books with interesting and important little notes. Or, what about Ecclesiastes? Essentially a wise person’s meditation on the meaning of life, it is pretty difficult material in some ways. Think about this in terms of the power of a publishing program.

Theology and doctrine

Another book that challenges readers is Romans. Or, think of Hebrews. Are you exploring every opportunity to present arguments

and ideas, and let people think for themselves? Readers actually appreciate this. God did not fear it. Books have historically been better than any other form of communication for apologetics, for doctrine, for study materials. Books are reasonable. People do not get mad at a book. If they do not agree with it, they can put it aside. They can consider its content in private, quietly. No one else has to know. Books do not demand an immediate response, and sometimes that’s a very powerful way of breaking down defenses. Is your publishing program challenging readers?

Other forms

The Bible has many forms of literature. It includes quite a few sermons, especially in the Old Testament, the Gospels, and the Book of Acts. Most of the prophetic books are anthologies of sermons. Evangelical publishers often produce this kind of material, but books like Daniel and Revelation do not have a parallel in modern literature. Apocalyptic literature is unlike anything else in the Bible, as well, and demonstrates the awe-inspiring range of creativity that God has in His publishing program. Review His catalog. Expand your thinking.

Another aspect of the Bible is that its multiple books demonstrate how God maximizes the distinctive quality of print media—its intimacy of communication.

People have a very peculiar relationship with the printed word. They see books and magazines as friends.

So, how do you communicate with friends? How do you influence

them? What are they interested in? How do you dialogue?

In communicating with people as friends, it is not necessary to give them the whole message at once. In publishing, we have multiple opportunities to communicate the truth. We win the readers’ trust, providing some information in one book and some information in another. Think through your publishing program with the concern for communicating as a friend.

Do not be afraid to dream. Our job as publishers is of course to make plans and think strategically about readers and markets. But, the real genius of publishing comes out one person at a time, one book at a time, from dreamers who want to change the world. God’s publishing program challenges writers, editors and publishers to the depths. ❖



“How do you communicate with friends? Think through your publishing program with the concern for communicating as a friend,” says Stafford.