

FIRST-PERSON: ‘Can I go to heaven when I die, too?’

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--I was in Peru recently helping to train some national leaders. As always, I was so thankful to be able to travel to teach humble Christian workers like these students. They are sincere believers striving to do the best they can with the little they have. It always humbles me how appreciative they are and how much they sacrifice to come and be a part of the few training opportunities that come their way.

On this occasion, I was teaching about protecting the flock from cults when the students' questions began to turn to the topic of basic doctrines. I was glad to be scratching where it itched, so it was fine with me if they wanted to move in that direction. I stressed that we not only need to know the truth but also teach it to others. A young indigenous lady asked me how we can do this when many among them do not read or write. Since I have been interested in reaching and teaching oral cultures for years, I was thankful for the chance to address that issue.

I launched into my professor mode and shared with the class how more than 70 percent of the unreached world consists of oral-culture peoples. I told them that many of those people do not have a written alphabet, so of course, they do not have a Bible or the ability to use the discipleship and training materials we use. I shared a little about chronological Bible storying techniques and the value of telling stories to teach oral-culture learners. In fact, I was so wound up in my lecture that it was a while before I noticed that several faces were concerned.

When I paused to ask what they were thinking, it broke my heart. An older indigenous lady named Fortunata was obviously troubled, so I asked her to share her question. “What about me?” she asked. “Can I go to heaven when I die, too?” Seeing the confusion on my face, she clarified, “We have always been told that we could not enter into the Kingdom of heaven if we could not read.” Through a voice that occasionally stopped for composure, I reminded her that in the plan of salvation the ability to read was not a requirement to be right with God. I told her that most of Jesus' hearers and early followers were oral learners. We all smiled amid a chorus of “amens.”

Fortunata is a precious believer who sincerely wants to follow the Lord Jesus. A small church meets in her humble home, and just like many others, it labors along without proper teaching. Even one of the most prolific evangelical denominations in Peru does not have pastors for 90 percent of its churches. Some of the brothers told me that, overall, only half of the evangelical churches have pastors and many of them do not have pastoral preparation or theological training. They mean well and are sincere but have been untaught or wrongly taught, if taught at all.

Back in the USA, I teach in one of the best theological seminaries in the world. I rub shoulders on a daily basis with some of the most brilliant professors and students in the world. I can walk from my office and in two minutes be in one of the best theological libraries in the world. Spending my days in this environment makes it so easy for me to slip into a mode that assumes far too much. How it grieves my heart when I find humble believers and Christian workers like this precious sister who struggle on with no books, no formal

training and the constant attack of false teaching.

When I walk through the door in my stateside classroom or in my church, people often greet me with smiles, pats on the back and requests for my time or opinion. It feeds the flesh and makes me feel useful. When I have the opportunity to meet with these humble Bible-hungry believers in other nations, I find it hard to leave. And when I do leave and return to my highly academic comfort zone, it seems a little like taking a seat on a lifeboat and deserting those going down on the Titanic. I sometimes wonder about the greeting I will get when I walk through the door to heaven. I know I will see the Fortunatas and that they will forgive me, but I wonder about those who never heard at all.

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