

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Scourge of Biblical Illiteracy

Important researcher and evangelical Christian, George Barna, has written: “The Christian body in America is immersed in a crisis of biblical illiteracy. How else can you describe matters when most churchgoing adults reject the accuracy of the Bible, reject the existence of Satan, claim that Jesus sinned, see no need to evangelize, believe that good works are one of the keys to persuading God to forgive their sins, and describe their commitment to Christianity as moderate or even less firm?” Consider additional evidence Barna has surfaced of widespread biblical illiteracy in America:

- The most widely known Bible verse among adult and teen believers is “God helps those who help themselves.” But this is not a verse from Scripture.
- Less than one in ten believers possess a biblical worldview as the basis for his/her decision-making.
- When given 13 basic teachings from the Bible, only 1% of adult believers firmly embraced all 13 as being biblical perspectives.
- Of students at Wheaton College, which represents almost every Protestant denomination in the US from every state, NT professor Gary Burge has uncovered these statistics:
 1. One-third could not put the following in order: Abraham, the Old Testament prophets, the death of Christ and Pentecost.
 2. Half could not sequence the following: Moses in Egypt, Isaac’s birth, Saul’s death and Judah’s exile.
 3. One-third could not identify Matthew as an apostle from the list of New Testament names.
 4. When asked to locate the biblical book supplying a given story, one-third could not find Paul’s travels in Acts; half did not know that the Christmas story was in Matthew; half did not know that the Passover story was in Exodus.
- Barna has also researched the beliefs of churchgoing American Protestant denominational members. A summary of his salient findings:
 1. Only 35% of mainline Protestant church members believe Jesus was sinless.
 2. Only 34% believe the Bible is totally accurate.
 3. Only 27% agree that works do not merit salvation, only faith does.
 4. Only 20% believe that Satan is real.

- Among nondenominational Christian churches, there is a difference, but not much:
 1. 48% believe Satan is real.
 2. 60% agree that works do not merit salvation; only faith does.
 3. 70% believe that the Bible is totally accurate.
 4. Barna's research confirms that the Assembly of God denomination has the highest commitment to essential Christian doctrines: 77% believe the Bible is totally accurate; 70% believe Christ was sinless; only 56% believe Satan is real; while 64% agree that works do not merit heaven; only faith does.

So, even among evangelical church members, large percentages still deny essential Christian doctrines. Barna is certainly correct when he expresses particular concern over how Christians view Jesus Christ: "Literally millions of Americans who declare themselves to be Christian contend that Jesus was just like the rest of us when it comes to temptation—fallen, guilty, impure, and Himself in need of a savior."

Evangelical Christian leaders have been lamenting the loss of confidence in God's Word in this Postmodern, Post Christian culture for over two decades. Yet, what Barna's research indicates is that among confessing Christians there is the same lack of confidence and belief in biblical essentials when it comes to doctrine. The tragedy of this harsh reality is that the Bible itself affirms its centrality in our relationship with God. Kenneth Berding, New Testament professor at Biola University, reminds of these central verses:

- When God commissioned Joshua to lead Israel in the Conquest, He declared: "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it" (Joshua 1:8).
- Psalm 1:1-3: "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all he does, he prospers."
- Psalm 119:97: "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day."
- The New Testament authors included over 300 direct quotations from the Old Testament (not counting the hundreds of allusions to the OT). The NT authors knew the OT; indeed their minds were saturated with it. We should follow their model!

Berding offers four major reasons for the current ignorance about and illiteracy of the Bible:

1. **Distractions:** In 1986, Neil Postman argued that the loss of personal freedom would not come from outside oppression but when people "adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think." Postman wrote in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*: "What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell

feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.” Postman has successfully described American Postmodern culture.

2. **Misplaced Priorities:** Meditating on God’s Word is something every Christian should do. Nothing is more central to the Christian life! Competing with this absolute priority for the Christian are TV, social networking and video games, among many other pastimes. But as Berding suggests, “We need a revival of the Bible.” It must be our priority.
3. **Unwarranted Overconfidence:** This reason stems from arrogance, a near hubris that manifests itself in this sentiment, “We already know more of the Bible than we put into practice anyway.” Going to Sunday school as a child, to AWANA, to youth group or even as adults to our respective small groups, do not equate with knowledge of and meditation upon God’s Word. In the Bible classes I have taught over the years, I always have placed this quote from Charles Simeon at the top of the syllabus: “Justification is by faith; knowledge of the Word of God is by works.” Such knowledge is central to sanctification and to our walk with God. To ignore this or to deny this is really a sin for which we need to repent.
4. **The Pretext of Being Too Busy:** There is little doubt that American Christians are busy—outrageously so: Young mothers raising three children, the corporate executive, the industrial worker working overtime, etc. But as a very wise man one time counseled me, “You schedule what you believe is important.” Hence, it is imperative that we as Christians simply build into our schedule the reading of God’s Word. Is it important? Yes. If other things are important, we schedule them. Therefore, build into your time schedule each day the reading of God’s Word.

For 2016, American churches and individual American Christians must recover the centrality and urgency of Bible reading, of biblical teaching and preaching, and adamantly refuse to sideline this priority. We often pray for revival, but perhaps the basic premise of revival is that we do indeed need a revival of the Bible.

See Kenneth Berding, “The Crisis of Biblical Illiteracy” *Biola Magazine* (Spring 2014); Michael Vlach, “Crisis in America’s Churches: Bible Knowledge at All-Time Low,” *The Church of the Living God* (1 September 2004) in www.joegriffin.org; and www.albertmohler.org (21 January 2016).