

Bible Literacy:
Crisis in America

BIB 103
(Introduction to Hermeneutics)

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Central idea: Statistics show that there is a shocking lack of knowledge of basic Bible knowledge among Americans. This is particularly puzzling in view of the availability of Bibles and Bible related materials.

- I. The Bible is the best-selling title in America.
 - A. Twenty-five million copies of the Bible are sold annually.
 - B. Americans spent 2.4 billion dollars on Bibles in 2006.
- II. Surveys show that the majority of Americans are biblically illiterate.
 - A. Illiteracy ranks high among the Christian community.
 - B. Youth are particularly affected by biblical illiteracy.
- III. There are two basic reasons why Bible illiteracy rates are high.
 - A. Americans simply are not reading the Bible
 - B. Many churches do not emphasize Bible learning in their educational programs.
- IV. Americans need to be reminded why they should read the Bible.
 - A. We are commanded to read it.
 - B. The Bible is God's living letter to humanity.
 - C. The Bible provides the answers to all of life's issues.
 - D. The Bible reveals the future.

Conclusion: It is time for America to get back to the Bible. Our existence as a nation depends on our reverence for God and His Word.

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America's Bible Literacy Crisis

America is in a Bible literacy crisis. Statistics show that Americans are shockingly ignorant of basic Bible knowledge despite the abundant availability of Bibles.

Consider these statistics from a Chicago Tribune article of June 2007:

- Twenty-five million copies of the Bible are sold annually in America. The Bible is not only the best-selling title in America, it also is available in a multitude of translations and paraphrased editions.
- A Gallup Poll reveals that more than 75 percent of Americans say they believe the Bible is either the word of God or inspired by the word of God.
- In 2006, religious books accounted for 6.4 percent of all book sales.
- Americans spent \$2.4 billion on Bibles and other religious books last year. This was an increase of 5.6 percent over 2005, the biggest percentage increase of any book category.”¹

¹ Chicago Tribune, reprinted in the Colorado Springs Gazette June 16, 2006.

The Baptist Standard, a publication of the Texas Baptist Convention, reveals that the Gideons International distribute annually in excess of 45 million Bibles. This computes on the average at 86 Bibles distributed every minute.²

With the rampant availability of Bibles and Bible related materials and given the obvious respect the Bible garners in America, how can there possibly be a Bible literacy crisis in America?

Statistics quoted in the December 2000 issue of *The Baptist Standard* confirm accounts of Bible illiteracy:

- A Gallup survey shows that fewer than half of Americans can name the first book of the Bible (Genesis), only one-third know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount (many named Billy Graham, not Jesus), and one-quarter do not know what is celebrated on Easter.
- A 1997 Barna Research poll showed 12 percent of Christians think Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. Eighty percent of born-again Christians believe it is the Bible that says "God helps them that help themselves."

In conjunction with the October release of the animated feature, "The Ten Commandments", Kelton Research questioned 1000 Americans on their knowledge of the biblical Ten Commandments.

² The Baptist Standard, December 4, 2000.

Even though 80 percent could name the ingredients of a Big Mac (McDonald's), only 6 in 10 could name the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." ³

Most of the participants in the Kelton Research survey recalled the names of the four Beatles but many could not recall one single commandment. ⁴

Bible illiteracy is not just confined to the unchurched secular population of America. According to Gary Burge, professor of New Testament studies at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois, there is a crisis of basic Bible knowledge in the church also – especially among youth.

In an article published in Christianity Today in 1999, Burge wrote about surveys which are administered by Wheaton College to incoming freshmen to assess their knowledge of the Bible.

These students, who represent every Protestant denomination in America, are asked basic Bible questions.

Following are some of the results quoted by Professor Burge:

- One-third of the students tested could not put the following in sequential order: Abraham, the Old Testament prophets, the death of Christ, and Pentecost.

³ Allie Martin, "Ten Commandments' Survey of Americans," October 12, 2007.

⁴ Helen Gray, Wichita Eagle, October 13, 2007.

- Half could not sequence the following: Moses in Egypt, Isaac's birth, Saul's death, and Judah's exile.
 - One-third could not identify Matthew as an apostle from a list of New Testament names.
 - One-third could not identify the book of Acts as the location of Paul's missionary travels; half did not know that the Christmas story was in Matthew, half did not know that the Passover story was in Exodus. ⁵
- Burge decided to test yet another level, high school youth, with a

25-question test. The results, published in the same article, were similar to those of the college freshmen:

- Eighty percent could not place Moses, Adam, David, Solomon, Abraham in chronological order.
- Only 20 percent knew that Paul's travels are recorded in the book of Acts.
- Only 33 percent could locate the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament.
- Eighty percent could not locate the Lord's Prayer.

In a report on America's religious illiteracy, *USA Today* reported that 50 percent of high school seniors think Sodom and Gomorrah were married. ⁶

⁵ Gary M. Burge, "The Greatest Story Never Read," Christianity Today.

⁶ USA Today, "America's Biblical Illiteracy", March 8, 2007.

With 92 percent of Americans owning a Bible, why is there such a lack of basic knowledge of the Bible?

The blame for biblical ignorance can probably be laid at several sources. I wish to focus on only two.

First and foremost, the blame must be laid on the individual because Americans simply are not reading the Bible. George Gallup summarized it best when he said, "We revere the Bible but we don't read it." ⁷

A Gallup Poll showed the number of people who read the Bible at least occasionally has dropped to 59 percent, down from 73 percent in the 1980s. ⁸

So why aren't people reading the Bible?

Tyndale House Publishers did a survey to find the answer to this perplexing question. Their survey showed that 64 percent of Americans said they did not read the Bible because they are too busy. Eighty percent said the Bible is too confusing and hard to understand. ⁹

Of course these are not valid excuses for not reading the Bible. The majority of Americans are busy but we tend to find time to do those things that we enjoy or that we deem important.

Bible reading is simply not a priority.

⁷ The Baptist Standard, December 4, 2000.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Woodrow Kroll, president of Back to the Bible, had this to say about Bible illiteracy: “When we speak of creeping Bible illiteracy in America, we are not talking about the inability to read but the choice not to read...This failure to read the Bible consistently, or to hear its truth consistently, is the major factor in Bible illiteracy in America. It is an epidemic in ...America.”¹⁰

The fact that the Bible might be “confusing and hard to understand” is also an invalid excuse in view of the hundreds of Bible translations and paraphrased editions that are available.

Secondly, blame for the dismal lack of knowledge of the Bible lies with the church.

Michael J. Valch, author of “Crisis in America’s Churches”, postulates that there is an overemphasis on personal experience rather than Bible education in most churches.

Valch goes on to say that pastors have adopted a devotional, life-lesson approach in preaching to the exclusion of serious Bible exposition.

Valch also adds that solid theological teaching has been ditched in the education of the youth in favor of using texts as “springboards for devotional reflection...”

¹⁰ Woodrow Kroll, “The New America and the New Bible Illiteracy” June 27, 2007.

Karen Jones, Christian education professor at Golden Gate Theological Seminary and author of "Transforming Student Ministry: Research Calling for Change", was quoted in the May 1, 2006 issue of the Southern Baptist Texas Convention news. Jones said, "There are key passages and books that we faithfully teach (to youth), but large portions of Scripture that we overlook or only mention in passing. Our teenagers rarely complete an in-depth study of the entire Bible, even if they participate in our ministries for a full six years. Whether it is intentional or not, the result is the same; our teenagers often leave our ministries with an incomplete understanding of biblical truth."

Christian apologist Anthony Horvath maintains that youth who are reared in church are not being taught how to defend their faith. ¹¹ When these young people leave the familiar surroundings of church and home, many of them fall prey to other doctrines and philosophies because they have not received a foundation of biblical truth and doctrine.

Why should Americans read the Bible? Why should we have active Bible educational programs for youth? Let the Word of God speak for itself:

- 1) We should read and study the Bible because it is commanded.
- 2 Timothy 2:15 ~ *Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. KJV*

¹¹ Anthony Horvath, "Saving Our Youth", August 14, 2007.

- 2) The Bible reveals God's plan of redemption. Romans 1:16-17 ~
For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17 For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. KJV
- 3) The Bible equips the Christian for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17~ *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:17 That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works. KJV*
- 4) The Bible is "God-breathed". 2 Timothy 3:16 a ~ *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God...."*
- 5) The Word of God is the Christian's weapon. Ephesians 6:17 ~
"...the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God..."KJV
- 6) The Bible reveals the future for both the believer and the unbeliever. Revelation 4:1 ~ *After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter.KJV*

The Bible is not composed of mere words printed on a page. The Bible is alive. We could even say it is a living organism.

John 6:63 ~ *The words that I speak, they are spirit and they are life.*

Hebrews 4:12 ~ *For the word of God is quick (full of life), and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. KJV*

God says of His word: "...I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled."¹²

The statistics quoted in this paper reveal the symptoms of spiritual death in our nation. Where there is spiritual death, the death of the society is not far behind. It is past time for spiritual renewal in America and it is high time for America to get back to the Bible.

¹² Jeremiah 1:12 (NIV).

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