

Christian Education and Biblical Illiteracy

Christian education stands at the center of the church's life and mission — but you wouldn't know that as you observe many churches at work.

While America's evangelical Christians are rightly concerned about the secular worldview's rejection of biblical Christianity, we ought to give some urgent attention to a problem much closer to home — biblical illiteracy in the church. This scandalous problem is our own, and it's up to us to fix it.

Researchers George Gallup and Jim Castelli put the problem squarely: "Americans revere the Bible — but, by and large, they don't read it. And because they don't read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates." How bad is it? Researchers tell us that it's worse than most could imagine.

Fewer than half of all adults can name the four gospels. Many Christians cannot identify more than two or three of the disciples. According to data from the Barna Research Group, 60% of Americans can't name even five of the Ten Commandments. "No wonder people break the Ten Commandments all the time. They don't know what they are," says George Barna, President of the firm. The bottom line: "Increasingly, America is biblically illiterate."

Multiple surveys reveal the problem in stark terms. According to 82% of Americans, "God helps those who help themselves" is a Bible verse. Those identified as born-again Christians did better — by 1%. A majority of adults think the Bible teaches that the most important purpose in life is taking care of one's family.

Some of the statistics are enough to perplex even those aware of the problem. A Barna poll indicated that at least 12% of adults believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. Another survey of graduating high school seniors revealed that more than 50% thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife. A considerable number of respondents to one poll indicated that Billy Graham preached the Sermon on the Mount. We are in big trouble.

Secularized Americans should not be expected to be knowledgeable about the Bible. As the nation's civic conversation is stripped of all biblical references and content, Americans increasingly live in a scripture-free public space. Confusion and ignorance of the Bible's content should be assumed in post-Christian America.

The larger scandal is biblical ignorance among Christians. Choose whichever statistic or survey you like, the general pattern is the same. America's Christians know less and less about the Bible. And it shows.

By R. Albert Mohler, Jr.

How can a generation be biblically shaped in its understanding of human sexuality when it believes Sodom and Gomorrah to be a married couple? No wonder Christians show a growing tendency to compromise on the issue of homosexuality. Many who identify themselves as Christians are similarly confused about the Gospel itself. An individual who believes that “God helps those who help themselves” will find salvation by grace and justification by faith to be alien concepts.

Christians who lack biblical knowledge are the products of churches that marginalize biblical knowledge. Bible teaching now often accounts for only a diminishing fraction of the local congregation’s time and attention. The move to small group ministry has certainly increased opportunities for fellowship, but many of these groups never get beyond superficial Bible study.

Youth ministries are asked to fix problems, provide entertainment, and keep kids busy. How many local-church youth programs actually produce substantial Bible knowledge in young people?

Even the pulpit has been sidelined in many congregations. Preaching has taken a back seat to other concerns in corporate worship. The centrality of biblical preaching to the formation of disciples is lost, and Christian ignorance leads to Christian indolence and worse.

This really is *our* problem, and it is up to this generation of Christians to reverse course. Recovery starts at home. Parents are to be the first and most important educators of their own children, diligently teaching them the Word of God. [See *Deuteronomy 6:4-9.*] Parents cannot franchise their responsibility to the congregation, no matter how faithful and biblical it may be. God assigned parents this non-negotiable responsibility, and children must see their Christian parents as teachers and fellow students of God’s Word.

Churches must recover the centrality and urgency of biblical teaching and preaching and refuse to sideline the

teaching ministry of the preacher. Pastors and churches too busy — or too distracted — to make biblical knowledge a central aim of ministry will produce believers who simply do not know enough to be faithful disciples.

At the same time, churches must re-energize educational ministries designed to educate every generation in the truths of God’s Word and the richness of the Christian faith. This will require the unapologetic recovery of **teaching** as a central concern of the church.

The crucial role of educational ministries will require a congregation to order its priorities. Budgets, buildings, and program emphases in church life reflect the **real** priorities of a congregation. Teaching requires time, financial resources, and facilities that optimize the learning experience.

Show me a church building with an educational facility to house a growing and dynamic Bible teaching ministry, and I will show you a church likely to grow in every ministry. A church without a vital educational ministry is literally starving itself to death.

We will not believe more than we know, and we will not live higher than our beliefs. The many fronts of Christian compromise in this generation can be directly traced to biblical illiteracy in the pews and the absence of biblical preaching and teaching in our homes and churches.

This generation must get deadly serious about the problem of biblical illiteracy, or a frighteningly large number of Americans — Christians included — will go on thinking that Sodom and Gomorrah lived happily ever after. ■

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Dr. Mohler hosts the Albert Mohler Program on the Salem Communications Network daily (Mon.–Fri.) from 5-6:00 p.m., EST

Dr. Mohler’s Top Ten Books Every Preacher Should Read, 2004

1. George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (Yale University Press)
2. Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion* (Free Press)
3. James A. Herrick, *The Making of the New Spirituality* (InterVarsity Press)
4. Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ* (Eerdmans)
5. Ajith Fernando, *Jesus Driven Ministry* (Crossway Books)
6. Adam Nicholson, *God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (Harper Collins)
7. John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding* (Baker Books)
8. Millard Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?* (Zondervan)
9. Mark Noll, *America’s God* (Oxford University Press)
10. N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress Press)

