

# **Biblical Illiteracy: Philosophical Underpinnings and a Proposed Contribution to Educational Ministry**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Biblical illiteracy is an educational trend that has been observed throughout the recent history of the church in America. Studies extending well past the adult lifetimes of American Christians demonstrate a growing trend: modern Christians do not know the Bible very well, and it does not influence their thinking, values, or lifestyles to an extent that leads to a radical departure from those of the world around them. This article will examine some of the causes of biblical illiteracy and discuss some underlying philosophical issues. The article will conclude with an exploration of Bandura's model of self-efficacy in learning, and discuss some ways in which his research can guide churches in framing educational ministries which are more effective in addressing the causes of biblical illiteracy.

## **BIBLICAL ILLITERACY: IDENTIFICATION, DEFINITION, AND DESCRIPTION**

Edwards defines biblical literacy as "Knowing the Bible; Being familiar with popular Bible characters; Being able to recognize common biblical phrases; and Being able to connect the knowledge to references in literature."<sup>1</sup> If this definition is accurate, then biblical illiteracy is the inverse of the condition describe therein: ignorance of foundational biblical characters, phrases, events, and biblical representations in literature. Applied to Christian discipleship, biblical illiteracy is the condition in which a professing Christian lives in ignorance of

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards, Katie. *Rethinking Biblical Literacy* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 5.

biblical content and principles. Grudem, Collins, and Schreiner insist on a Christological perspective in Bible reading- thus, biblical literacy is oriented toward understanding not simply Bible stories or facts, but how the entire Scriptures point to Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Frequent attendance at worship services and educational ministries of the church does not appear to be sufficient to impart biblical literacy to Christians. Willis discovered in 1968 that exposure to sermons and educational programs did not increase an individual's Bible knowledge compared to those who do not participate in church educational programs and services.<sup>3</sup> Richardson found in 1983 that there is a positive correlation between a person's Bible knowledge and that person's beliefs, but that regular church attendance did not substantially increase Bible knowledge or theological depth.<sup>4</sup> Gallup and Castelli found in 1989 that biblical literacy had increased slightly during the 1980s, but attributed this increase to college education rather than church educational programs.<sup>5</sup>

In 2006 a Barna poll found that 47% of Americans read their Bibles sometime each week.<sup>6</sup> Just eight years later another Barna poll noted a 10% decrease in Bible reading among Americans.<sup>7</sup> This same study noted that 88% of Americans own a Bible, and 56% profess to believe that the Bible is the Word of God. In spite of access to the Bible and a belief that it contains

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<sup>2</sup> Grudem, Wayne, John C. Collins, and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Understanding Scripture : An Overview of the Bible's Origin, Reliability, and Meaning* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 6.

<sup>3</sup> J. Willis, *Correlate of Bible Knowledge*, Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 1968, 7. 280.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Richardson, *Do Bible Facts Change Attitudes?* Bibliotheca Sacra, 1983, 40. P. 163-171.

<sup>5</sup> George Gallup and Jim Castelli, The People's Religion (New York: McMillan, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2007), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Bret Mavrich, "The Word Made Fresh: As Bible Reading Falls and Biblical Illiteracy Rises, Innovators Are Finding Creative Ways to Get People to Engage with Scripture," *Leadership Journal*, Summer (2015): 41

the truth of God, Americans do not read the Bible with regularity, and American Christians do not demonstrate a significant understanding of its contents. Many Christians indicate a desire to know the Scriptures, but do not read it. In 2017, Barna published the results of a five-year study that noted a significant gap between American adults' professed desire to read the Bible, and their actual practice of Bible reading.<sup>8</sup> A 2019 Barna study indicated that only 5% of Americans interact with the Bible frequently and are significantly shaped by it.<sup>9</sup>

Numerous theories have been posited to explain the prevalence of biblical illiteracy among American Christians. Baart notes that many Christians neglect Bible reading because they have a view of God as harsh and distant, or because they believe that reading the Bible will place them under moral obligation to Him.<sup>10</sup> Carson also asserts that people avoid reading the Bible because their personal depravity causes them to fear the accountability that knowledge of Scripture imposes.<sup>11</sup> Sproul believed that Christians hesitate to read the Bible for themselves because they have been led to believe that it is too difficult for laypeople, and that only specialists can understand it, or that it is dull and boring.<sup>12</sup> Whitehead believes that Christians hesitate to read the Bible because they are intimidated by its size.<sup>13</sup> Olesberg and Fernando attribute lack

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<sup>8</sup> Barna Group, "Bible Reading in 2017: A New Year's Resolution," (2017), <https://www.barna.com/research/bible-reading-2017-new-years-resolution/#.XbE9q3rf3XM.gmail>.

<sup>9</sup> Barna Group, "State of the Bible 2019: Trends in Engagement", accessed December 10, 2021 at <https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-bible-2019/>

<sup>10</sup> Aaron Baart, "Why Christians Don't Read the Bible," *Digital Collections @ Dordt* (2015) [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty\\_work/338](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/338).

<sup>11</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), 1138.

<sup>12</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> David Whitehead, *Making Sense of the Bible: How to Connect with God Through His Word* (South Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers 2014), 10.

of Bible reading to distraction and poor time management.<sup>14</sup> Westerholm and Westerholm ascribe biblical illiteracy to the assumption that the Bible is too complex.<sup>15</sup> Wray asserts that people hesitate to read their Bibles because they believe that they will not understand it.<sup>16</sup> Malan believes that the literary, cultural, and historical “chasm” between the biblical text and modern readers intimidates people.<sup>17</sup>

These theories apply specifically to *biblical* illiteracy, and do not take into account the increasingly post-literate nature of American society. There is no clear, monolithic cause for biblical illiteracy among literate adults with access to the Bible and a professed belief that it is the Word of God. It is reasonable to assume that a variety of factors contribute to biblical illiteracy, including spiritual and moral factors unique to individuals which cannot be quantified.

## **UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES**

Two primary fields of philosophy are relevant to the issue of biblical illiteracy among professing Christians with access to the Bible: epistemology and axiology. Epistemology is the study what may be known and how it may be known. Axiology is the study of what holds value and why and under what conditions it holds value. Axiology’s relevant subfields are aesthetics (the study beauty) and ethics (the study of the good life). This section will briefly survey a few intersections of epistemology and axiology with the phenomenon of biblical illiteracy.

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<sup>14</sup> Lindsay Olesberg, *The Bible Study Handbook : A Comprehensive Guide to an Essential Practice* (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 71.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Westerholm and Martin Westerholm, *Reading Sacred Scripture : Voices from the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 89.

<sup>16</sup> T. J. Wray, *What the Bible Really Tells Us: The Essential Guide to Biblical Literacy* (Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 11.

<sup>17</sup> Gert Malan, “Can the Chasms Be Bridged?: Different Approaches to Bible Reading.” *Hervormde Teologiese Studies*, 2010 66 (1).

As noted above, American Christians tend to express a strong belief that the Bible is the Word of God. That is, they tend to believe that what may be known of God may be known through the Scriptures. Especially among evangelical Christians, a rational theological epistemology exists which supports belief that a knowledge of Scripture increases one's knowledge of God Himself. However, the prevalence of biblical illiteracy among people who hold this view is the root of quandary at hand. If Christians believe that the Bible reveals the character and nature of God and His expectations of humanity, why don't they read the Bible and gain greater mastery of what it teaches?

The epistemological problem among Christians who choose to remain biblically illiterate may be a subjective one. That is, while they believe that God can be known through Scripture (among other means), they may not be confident that *they* can know God through Scripture. Simply because something is self-evident does not mean that it can be perceived. God's essence is existence, and God's existence is true *a priori*. Theological concepts such as aseity and divine simplicity summarize this concept, but it does not necessarily follow from God's self-evident existence that humanity has the capacity to know Him. Just as some truths are unknown, some truths are also unknowable.<sup>18</sup> Thus, a Christian may adopt a variation of Moore's Paradox,<sup>19</sup> which may be expressed thus: "God can be known from Scripture, but I don't believe I can know God from Scripture." A Christian with such an epistemological perspective may believe truly that the Scriptures reveal the nature of God, yet still lack confidence in his or her ability to know God through the Scriptures, thus creating a discontinuity between belief and action.

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<sup>18</sup> Williamson, Timothy, 2000, *Knowledge and its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press., 271.

<sup>19</sup> Moore, George Edward, "A reply to my critics", *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, edited by P. A. Schilpp. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1942), 543.

Axiologically, a Christian may claim to place a high value on Scripture, and yet abstain from any meaningful investment of effort to understand its meaning. Indeed, this seems to be the case. Evangelical Christians embrace and affirm *sola scriptura* as an axiom, it seems, and assume that simply holding Scripture high is a sufficient affirmation of its value.

Many Christians seem to have a poorly developed aesthetic sense, and do not see the beauty of the Word of God, thus they do not delight in it. This could follow from the general blunting of aesthetic appreciation prevalent in popular culture. Beauty has traditionally been associated with rarity, refinement, and skill in the creation of an object or of artistic human action. Contemporary society mass-produces cheap artifacts and entertainment with which Christians are bombarded frequently. Thus, it may be that contemporary Christians' lack of aesthetic appreciation does not apply only to the Bible, but results in an overall lack of appreciation of beauty. Nevertheless, it seems that Christians' entertainment and media consumption habits do not differ greatly from those of non-Christians, so they still seek some semblance of beauty. They do not pursue the higher pleasures of knowing God through the poetry and prose of Scripture, but they pursue the lower pleasure of mass-media entertainment.

Ethically, many Christians may subscribe to a form of ethical minimalism in which the absence of certain specific sins from their lives qualifies them as morally upright persons. Simply put, Christians do not seem to believe that they need to read and understand the teachings of Scripture to live moral lives. This may be attributed to an overall reduction in the scope, magnitude, and role of the study of ethics in personal living. Ancient Greek philosophers were concerned with how to live a good life; contemporary usage of the concept of ethics focuses on which behaviors are permitted and which are forbidden. Christians largely act as if they believe they are capable of living a good life without knowledge of God's Word.

Theologically, Christians' soteriological assumptions may contribute to their deficient epistemological and axiological assumptions. They may reason that because they are saved by the grace of God through the atonement of Jesus, they are not obligated to know God more deeply, to rejoice in His beauty, or to emphasize His role in living a good life. They may expect all these benefits in glorification and thus not actively pursue them as part of sanctification.<sup>20</sup>

## **EDUCATIONAL MINISTRY IMPLICATIONS**

Bandura's theory of self-efficacy provides a framework for building an educational ministry climate which promotes biblical literacy. According to Bandura, "self-efficacy refers to beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments."<sup>21</sup> Self-efficacy is a "self-referential judgment concerning future functioning".<sup>22</sup> In the context of biblical literacy, self-efficacy is the motivation of a Christian to study the Bible with confidence that such study will be successful and profitable. Biblical literacy, as with all forms of learning, is successful only when the learner is motivated to participate on a personal level, and when his or her psychological disposition toward such study is positive.

Self-efficacy comes from four sources, according to Bandura: vicarious learning, verbal persuasion, psychological states, and mastery experiences. Mastery experiences are the most influential source of motivation for self-efficacy. These are experiences in which a person exercises active agency deliberately, and perceives the outcome as valuable and successful. The normative approach in public worship, Bible

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Albert Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1997), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Robin K. Henson, "The Effects of Participation in Teacher Research on Teacher Efficacy and Empowerment" (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, College Station, 1999), 36, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

exposition, and educational ministries is verbal persuasion, but the most effective approach is creating mastery experiences. Therefore, in addition to attempting to persuade Christians to read their Bibles, churches should lead Christians into mastery experiences in which they successfully engage with Scripture in a way that is interesting and compelling- “challenging, but necessarily successful”.<sup>23</sup> In other words, church educational ministries should not simply teach biblical information, but should lead learners to a positive experience with the Word of God. “Performance successes generally raise beliefs of personal efficacy . . .”<sup>24</sup> The more positive contact Christians have with Scripture, the more likely they are to be motivated to actively participate in biblical learning.

In addition to mastery experiences, Bandura notes three other forms of experiences which can promote self-efficacy. Vicarious learning comes from watching the successes of other Christians. Vicarious learning has been demonstrated to promote spiritual self-efficacy.<sup>25</sup> As believers see others like themselves gaining an ability to read and understand the Word of God, they may be motivated to do so themselves. Verbal persuasion consists primarily of positive feedback and encouragement. The effectiveness of verbal persuasion depends on many factors, including the credibility of the teacher and the student-teacher relationship. Finally, physiological or affective states are important in developing self-efficacy. Negative experiences such as frustration or anxiety in Bible study reduce self-efficacy. Positive experiences enhance self-efficacy. The educational ministry of the church must provide, as much as

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<sup>23</sup> Henson, Robin K. “Fostering Self-Efficacy for Biblical Learning and Doctrinal Awareness with Micro-Teaching in a Brief Course on Bible Study” (D.Min. diss., Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, 2020), 7.

<sup>24</sup> Bandura, *Self-efficacy*, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Doug Oman, Carl E. Thoresen, Crystal L. Park, Phillip R. Shaver, Ralph W. Hood, and Thomas G. Plante, “Spiritual Modeling Self-Efficacy,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4, no. 4 (2012): 278.

possible, sufficient support for Christians to succeed in their Bible study and to perceive it to be a positive experience.

A strategy to enhance self-efficacy in biblical literacy should take into account the philosophical and psychological factors which contribute to biblical illiteracy. Based on the previous analysis, an intentional approach to church educational ministry should include, at a minimum, the following principles. It is beyond the scope of this article to prescribe their application in specific ministry settings.

First, a climate should be created in which biblical literacy is upheld in a positive light as normative for Christians. The church in all its ministries should celebrate Scripture, and biblical literacy should be presented, not as a burdensome obligation, but as a joyful opportunity. Consideration should be taken to promote the beauty of Scripture (aesthetics), the value of Scripture for living a good life (ethics), and the ability of ordinary people to know God through Scripture (epistemology). Such an approach is more likely to promote a positive attitude toward learning Scripture, as well as vicarious experiences as peers learn Scripture.

Second, educational ministries should focus their curricula on mastery experiences. The content of the Bible should be taught competently, but also in such a way that the learner takes an active role in interpreting Scripture. Mastery experiences require two elements: successful completion of a task, and a positive perception of the outcome. Christian educators should seek ways to engage adult learners in challenging exercises which produce successful outcomes.

Third, educational ministries may wish to shift their emphasis from “Bible study” to more positively-associated verbiage, such as “learning”, “celebration”, or “exploration.” This is because in society as a whole, and among Christians as well, the concept of study is a negative one, associated with industrial education, examinations, and potential failure. Most people do not actively

study anything, and do not associate studying with joy, enlightenment, or personal fulfillment. Educational ministries may be able to influence the affective states of learners by framing biblical literacy in a more positive way.

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